



CURSED VIDEO GAMES

POKÉMON PANICS,
MINECRAFT MYTHS
& THE LEGEND OF
POLYBIUS



SANTA'S SAUCERS FATHER CHRISTMAS AND ALIEN TECH

PHANTOM FLINGS GHOSTLY ROMANCES END IN DIVORCE

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A HEADLESS GHOST AND
A FLYING SAUCER FLAP...

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ASTONISHING, INCREDIBLE...
BUT TRUE"

A MODERN DEMONOLOGY

BRITAIN'S SATANIC PANIC AND
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spectral fact from spooky fiction and offers
his own tips for successful ghost hunting.



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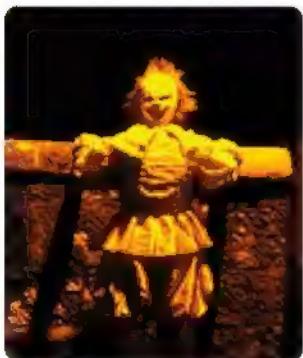
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EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS



SEASON'S WEIRDNESS

Welcome to our Christmas issue, a box of festively weird delights to see out 2023.

In our cover story, veteran Kentish monster hunter Neil Arnold celebrates the 60th anniversary of an oft-retold incident that brought high strangeness worthy of John Keel to a usually quiet corner of Neil's own home county. What has become known as 'The Hythe Mothman' seems on first inspection to be a straightforward, if terrifying, precursor of the entity famously reported three years later in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, lending its name to Keel's best known book, *The Mothman Prophecies*. But as Neil's research revealed, while the Hythe incident initially sounded a lot like its more celebrated American cousin – teens encounter a headless bat-winged entity in the dark lanes on the edge of town – things swiftly became even stranger and events less amenable to a single interpretation, with mystery lights, black magic, local lore, a burgeoning interest in UFOs and a local clergyman's obsession with a wandering ghost all adding puzzling new layers to the case.

But you don't have to venture out into England's leaf-strewn autumnal countryside for some seasonal chills; Chris Wheatley's survey of cursed video games demonstrates that horrors aplenty lurk behind the code of *Minecraft*, *Morrowind* and a host of other titles – or, at least, that this relatively new entertainment technology has, like films and comics before it, produced both moral panics and an undergrowth of sometimes alarming urban legend.

Elsewhere, Simon Young unearths some fascinating Christmas folklore (who knew farm animals still observed the Julian calendar in the 19th century?), Peter McCue skewers the pretentious paranormalists you wouldn't want to

ABOVE: Etienne Gilfillan captured this spontaneous simulacrum of the Hythe Mothman (or a weird owl) having fogged his lens while taking some shots in Regent's Park.

be stuck with at the FT office party, Stu Neville reopens the 1970s Readers Digest book that transformed him from skiving schoolboy to budding fortean, and Alan Murdie recalls his childhood passion for ghosts and the reactions of his family. We continue to look back at our first 50 years with a second selection of Paul Sieveking's favourite tales from the early Noughties and Bob Rickard's examination of the historical context for Britain's Satanic panic... which seems disturbingly resonant at the end of 2023.

ERRATA

FT436:66: Mark Pearson emailed to point out a discrepancy in Richard Freeman's Fortean Traveller article "The Gef Pilgrimage", noting that two different dates are given for the release of mongooses by farmer David Malcolm Irving who once owned the house Eary Cushlin: 1912 and 1907. Were there two releases, or was one of the dates incorrect? Richard assures us that there was only one release, and that it took place in 1907. We put the confusion down, of course, to Gef's predictable attempts to muddy the investigative waters.

FT436:21: Philip Eagle of Woodford Green wrote in with a correction to Ulrich Magin's round-up of Euro-news in this issue's "Strange Continent", pointing out that "the Shrek films are not from Disney but the rival studio DreamWorks (at the time, DreamWorks SKG). In fact, Lord Farquaad, the villain of the first film, is widely believed to be an unflattering caricature of Michael Eisner, who was CEO of Disney at the time."

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STRANGE DAYS

OF PANICS AND PENISES

More outbreaks of mass hysteria in schools and penis panic continues

MEXICAN WAVE

As well as the "poisoned" schoolgirls in Iran and Afghanistan (FT430:6-7, 435:24-25), "possessed" Ouija board users in Colombia (FT427:4-5, 431:4-5, 436:24) and "fentanyl overdosing" police in the US (FT431:5), Mexico has been having its own social panic. On 23 September 2022, a 12-year-old girl named Esmeralda emerged from the girls' toilets at the Federal 1 public secondary school in Tapachula and fainted. Her friend Dlala, who came out after her, then fainted too, swiftly followed by another nine girls and a boy, with another 22 school students complaining of severe headaches and vomiting. Some students reported a smoky smell, like burning leaves, making authorities suspect drugs, while others said they had seen a mustard-coloured powder in the bathroom, but toxicology revealed nothing. News of this triggered incidents elsewhere in Mexico, with 68 students passing out, vomiting, or becoming disoriented at a middle school in Bochil, 150 miles (240km) away, where toxicology again came up negative (although four students did show traces of cocaine). Esmeralda was also involved in a second incident at the Federal 1 public secondary school on 11 October, when 18 children fainted, although, again, no toxins could be found. In subsequent months, there were fainting waves at six different middle schools in Mexico, in four different states, hundreds of miles apart, involving 227 children in total. Students fainted or experienced unexplained dizziness, headaches and vomiting, and while most recovered quickly, some were



Some students reported a smoky smell, like burning leaves

afflicted for several weeks. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador even took to including updates about the school fainting episodes in his daily press conferences. Despite this, no cause was discovered, with various official reports concluding "probable intoxication through food", "probable transmission through the air", and "probable intoxication with stimulants", although it was generally believed drugs were involved somehow. Dr Carlos Alberto Pantoja Meléndez, an epidemiologist from Mexico City, carried out his own investigation based on the data available and published his results in June 2023. Having ruled out drugs, contaminated food, heatstroke, poisoning with chemicals or insecticide, he concluded that the cause

was mass psychogenic illness, most likely spread by social media. This prompted Dr Robert Bartholomew, co-author with Bob Rickard of *Mass Hysteria in Schools: A Worldwide History Since 1566* to say: "Now, social media is an extension of our senses, and we're always playing catch up... I think we are on the verge of a much bigger, global epidemic."

As if to confirm this prediction, in late September and early October, 95 girls at St Theresa's Eregi Girls High School, a boarding school in Kakamega, 232 miles (374km) northwest of Nairobi, Kenya, were hospitalised by a "mystery illness" that partially paralysed their legs.



In videos shared on social media, girls can be seen having trouble walking and were reported to have shown "symptoms of knee pain" and suffered severe headaches, vomiting and fever.

"The students were seen trembling on their hospital beds while others walked while staggering," reported local media. Health official Bernard Wesonga said that blood, urine and stool samples had been tested by the Kenya Medical Research Institute laboratories

LEFT: TV news coverage of the Bochil school panic. BELOW: Pupils at St Theresa's Eregi Girls' High School.

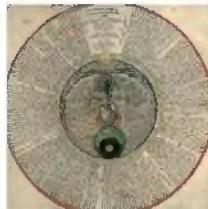
to determine the cause of the illness, but they have not yet found any cause for the paralysis, although some medics suggested electrolyte imbalance could be responsible. While some reports said that the school had been closed, officials issued a statement denying this. However, many parents chose to take their children out of school as a precaution, claiming it was easy for disease to spread there. It seems the education department's reluctance to close the school resulted in unrest, with some students throwing stones at visiting education officials. Dr Steven Wandei, the director of medical services in Kakamega county, urged parents not to take their daughters home, saying, "We have not established the nature of the disease that has affected the students. Taking them home could be risky because, if the disease is infectious, it is likely to wipe out the entire family." It appears that most girls recovered within a few days of being struck down, without any need for further medical intervention. Jared Obiero, the local director of education, suggested that while some of the students might be unwell, the majority could be "feigning their sickness... Form three students were to start their end of year exams on Wednesday, but some of them are opposing the school programme, claiming they are not ready for exams." Inevitably, conspiracy theory advocates, including Barak Obama's Kenyan half-brother, suggested Covid vaccination was the cause, as students at the



SERIOUSLY STRANGE

Anomalies in the spotlight at ASSAP event

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CRACKING THE CODE

How AI helps to uncover ancient secrets

PAGE 14



SANTA'S SAUCERS

The science of Father Christmas

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LEFT: Government officials address students at St Theresa's Eregi Girls' High School.

school had all been vaccinated in July last year, but medical officials said they had found no evidence that the vaccine was responsible, particularly given the time that had elapsed. oddiitycentral.com, 8 Jun; nation.africa, 4 Oct; timesofindia.indiatimes.com, dailymail.co.uk, vidmax.com, 5 Oct 2023.

PRIVATE IN PERIL

In Nigeria, the penis theft panic (see FT438:4-5) continues unabated; claims that men have had their genitals magically stolen by people who have touched them or shaken hands with them have now spread to Kogi, Nasarawa and Kaduna states and to the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). The scare has also expanded to include magical breast and vagina theft, with a woman working in government offices in Abuja tweeting a claim that "A woman's vagina got stolen this afternoon in my office, Federal Secretariat, Abuja... We are just here seeing wonders in this town. I'm scared. God abeg." It was later confirmed that the victim had been taken to the police station where officers had found it "impossible to penetrate the victim's private part" (1) and so confirmed that her vagina had been stolen, going on to swiftly arrest an alleged perpetrator. However, shortly afterwards,

police announced that the complainant was to be charged with "raising a false allegation". In FCT, police arrested a man over accusations he had stolen a woman's breasts while she was visiting a bank in Gwagwalada. She claimed that as she stood in the queue, the man had brushed her shoulders and back, causing her to collapse with dizziness, and when she recovered, she found her breasts had vanished. A witness said: "One of the bank's staff immediately invited a female security to move the lady into a bathroom to check herself properly." This allegedly confirmed the theft, causing bank security to call police, and although "the police came and picked up the suspect, even as the lady's breasts were returned back to her after 20 minutes", they were keeping the man in custody for questioning.

Authorities continue to struggle to bring the mania under control. Several people have been murdered by lynch mobs and many others beaten badly, including a pastor of the Deeper Life Bible Church in Makrudi, who, it was alleged, had offered local youths £1,000 for each penis they stole and had taught them how to use prayer to do it. In Gosa, a TikTok video was filmed of a woman named Grace Abraham being aggressively

interrogated for using a technological form of penis theft, with her accuser yelling at her, "You give men your phone so that after they are done making the call, penis will vanish. Isn't it?" and threatening to kill her unless she confesses and returns the stolen members. Fortunately, she was rescued by police.

Doctor Ninyo Onidiji, from the Benue State University Teaching Hospital, said the first cases of alleged penis theft in Nigeria had taken place in 1975 and that this panic had continued until 1977, when it subsided, only to reappear in 1990, and then again this year. Family health consultant Dr Agbor Ebuta added: "In West Africa, for example, between 1997 and 2003, 36 people were documented to have been lynched. In 2020, five people were lynched in Guma Local Government after being accused of involvement in the 'disappearance' of a penis." There have been numerous incidents involving mobs, and sometimes the police and military, beating both alleged penis thieves and, increasingly, their accusers, who, it is claimed, are making accusations to create a panic that can be exploited to pick pockets. Others are claiming that penis theft allegations are a scam by local magicians, known as marabouts, to boost their reputations. Allegedly the men who claim to lose their genitals are in cahoots with a marabout who, on hearing the hue and cry about vanishing genitals recites incantations, after which the "victim" says his missing parts have miraculously reappeared, thanks to the marabout's intervention. vanguardngr.com, 10 Oct; dailytrust.com, 5 Oct; tribuneonlineng.com, 29 Oct; opinionnigeria.com, 8 Oct; punchng.com, 21 Oct 2023.

EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

'RITUAL MASS MURDER' REPORT IN CHAPEL ST LEONARDS WAS YOGA CLASS

BBC News, 8 Sept 2023.

"I will break your f*** neck": Police officer 'grabbed naked woman covered in salad cream by the throat' in Hilton hotel**

Manchester Eve. News, 12 Sept 2023.

MAN TRYING TO CROSS ATLANTIC IN GIANT 'HAMSTER WHEEL' CHARGED OVER ALLEGED KNIFE THREAT

Guardian, 7 Sept 2023.

Fifteen people a day attacked by fish in Benidorm as people with moles warned

Independent, 4 Sept 2023.



SIDELINES

DUCK!

Police were called when residents of Poole in Dorset saw a man and a woman having a violent altercation over a duck in the middle of the road. "They were wrestling on the floor and trying to get the duck off each other," said a witness. By the time police arrived the couple had fled the scene, and the fate of the duck remains unknown. *Sun, 7 Jul 2023.*

FIRE FAIL

Fourteen vehicles were destroyed in a fire on an industrial estate in Launceston, Cornwall, after a paper sky lantern landed on a van's windscreen. The lantern set fire to the rubber on the vehicle's wipers, which in turn caused the whole van to ignite, with the fire swiftly spreading to adjacent vehicles. *Sun, 5 Jul 2023.*

UNSAFETY SIGN

As a helicopter landed to pick up passengers for a sightseeing ride at West Usk lighthouse in Newport, South Wales, its downdraft dislodged a 2ft (60cm) pre-flight safety sign and sent it flying. It hit one of the waiting passengers, who needed hospital treatment for a cut on the leg that required several stitches. *D.Mall, 17 Jan 2023.*

ON THE DOT

Motorists in Lichfield have taken to calling a junction in the city the "Dot Cotton roundabout" after a sticker of the *East Enders* character that has adorned a prominent yellow road sign there for years. No one seems to know how it got there, but one local said, "I saw Michael Fabricant on a light by Trent Valley Island," while a woman added, "I've seen an Ainsley Harriot nearby too." *Sunday Mercury, 16 Apr 2023.*



IT'S WITCHCRAFT

Accusations past and present, plus demon summoning for all the family



MICHAEL BURGESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: A 'witch village' or 'witch camp' in Gambia, Ghana, where accused witches – often widowed or unmarried older women and single mothers – are forced out of their communities to live in improvised shanties.

SEYCHELLES SORCERY

As part of an investigation into "witchcraft" and "unnatural and superstitious" practices after the discovery of two bodies illegally exhumed from a cemetery on the island of Mahé in the Seychelles, the country's main opposition party leader Patrick Herminie has been arrested. He was charged with witchcraft along with seven alleged accomplices following a raid on his party's offices by more than 40 police officers. The charges include possession of items intended for use in witchcraft, conspiracy to perform witchcraft and procuring services related to witchcraft. The raid took place after Herminie was named in a WhatsApp message sent to a Tanzanian who it was suggested was implicated in the exhumations and had been arrested at the main international airport on the island for possessing "magical" items. Authorities said these included stones, black wooden artefacts, small bottles of brownish liquid, a collection of powders, and documents with strange language and "demonic and Satanic" symbols. Allegedly, these resembled documents left in a series of religious buildings on Mahé, including

The practice of accusing people of being witches has been endemic

Catholic churches, that had been vandalised and desecrated. Herminie, who says he does not believe in witchcraft, said: "In Seychelles' history, there has never been until now, a political party leader arrested for superstition and witchcraft. This is something new and it is shameful for Seychelles." He describes his arrest as "a political show" by the Seychelles President Wavel Ramkalawan intended to "eliminate those who he knows will remove him from power in the 2025 elections". *BBC News, 3 Oct 2023.*

WITCH CAMPS

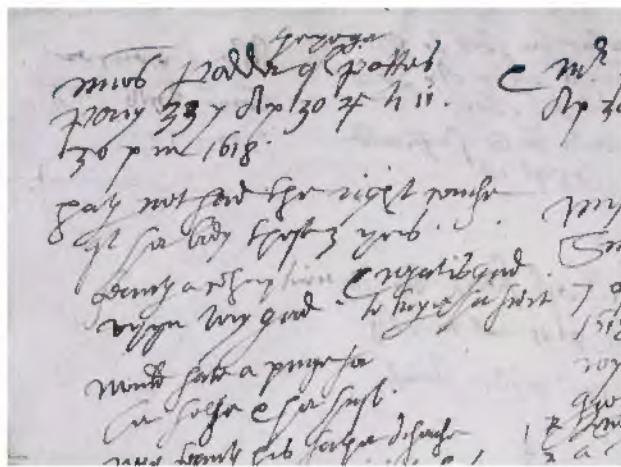
The Ghanaian parliament has passed a new law that makes it illegal to accuse someone of witchcraft, outlawing the "declaring, naming or labelling someone as a witch". It is intended to stop people setting themselves up as witch-finders and seeking out people they claim are "witches" and is

also intended to deal with the problem of "witch camps" in the country. The practice of seeking out people and accusing them of being witches has been endemic in Ghana in recent years, frequently resulting in mob violence, intimidation, and the beating of vulnerable individuals, who are often lynched or driven from their communities. The trigger for the legislation was the lynching of 90-year-old Akua Dente in Kafaba after she was accused of witchcraft.

The stigmatisation and shunning of people accused of being witches has resulted in the establishment of "witch camps" around the country, where accused witches, largely older or unmarried women, single mothers, and widows who have been forced out of their villages, live in improvised shanties that have been described as "uninhabitable". The US State Department's 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices singled out witchcraft accusations as being a major contributor to human rights violations in Ghana and by criminalising these the government is hoping to improve its human rights record. *ghanaweb.com, 29 Jul 2023.*



ABOVE LEFT: Richard Napier, the 17th century astrologer and doctor, widely reputed as "a physician both of body and soul". ABOVE RIGHT: Napier's casebooks throw fresh light on the relationship between women's occupations and accusations of witchcraft.



SIDELINES

POO BALLOON

Following the spy balloon panic in the US, a police officer in Boxtel, Holland, gave chase to a suspected spy balloon there. He had pursued it for several miles without getting any closer when he realised that it was actually pigeon poo on his windscreen. *D. Star, 5 May 2023.*

THERE'S NO SMOKE...

Finding himself completely lost while hiking in Arizona's Coconino National Park, with no food or water and a dead phone, Philip Powers lit three small fires in the hope that the smoke would help rescuers find him. It worked, but also started a major forest fire, earning Powers a \$300,000 (£240,000) fine, which will take him 122 years to pay off at \$200 (£160) a month. *D. Mirror, 25 Feb 2023.*

DRIVE-BY FRUITING

Pedestrians in Eastbourne and Hastings in East Sussex have been subject to a series of drive-by fruit attacks. One person was hit in the face with an apple while walking along Bohemia Road in Hastings, while another victim was struck in the arm with a tomato on Fire Road in Eastbourne. This was followed by two attacks in The Bourne, Hastings, where one victim was hit in the head with a tomato and another with an unknown object. Police have also received reports of seven other attacks involving fruit hurled from vehicles but have no clue as to who is responsible. *BBC News, 21 Apr 2023.*

DEMANDING GUESTS

Travelodge hotels have revealed some of their stranger requests from guests. One asked if the London Eye could be made to rotate backwards, just for them; another asked if they could have afternoon tea with Paddington Bear. Someone else wanted a tour of Milton Keynes's roundabouts in the Red Bull Formula One car and another guest asked for cooking lessons from Aunt Bessie, a fictional character used to sell frozen food. Hotel spokesperson Shakila Ahmed said that while staff "relish a good challenge" some demands prove to be impossible. *Metro, 14 Nov 2022.*

EMPATHETIC DEMON

The Walker Arts Centre in Minneapolis was accused of "encouraging witchcraft" and "Satanism" after it staged a family event with artist Tamar Ettun. Described as a "playful demon summoning session" Ettun's performance, called "Lilit the Empathetic Demon" invited families "to create a vessel to trap the demon that knows them best — perhaps the 'demon of overthinking' — and then participate in a playful ceremony to summon and befriend their demon". The website for the event went on to say, "After designing your trap, Lilit the Empathetic Demon will come from the dark side of the Moon to lead you in locating your feelings using ancient Babylonian techniques," accompanied by an image of Ettun washing what appears to be a placenta with a watering can. She also encouraged people to communicate with Lilit by texting "SUMMON" to 833-575-1049, promising them monthly messages with "demon drawings and somatic instructions".

"Demons have a bad reputation, but maybe we're just not very good at getting to know them," explained Ettun. The event was part of the museum's Free First Saturday program held monthly to bring in families, and attracted criticism in right wing and Christian media, who felt it was particularly important to point out that the institution received taxpayer funding. *alphaweb.org, 11 Aug 2023.*

DR NAPIER'S CASEBOOK

The casebooks of Richard Napier, a 17th century astrologer and doctor in Buckinghamshire, have been used by Cambridge University historian Dr Philippa Carter to analyse links between witchcraft accusations and women's occupations. The books, which survive in Oxford University's Bodleian Library, record the day-to-day activities of Napier, who was officially the rector of Great Linford, but was widely reputed as a "physician both of body and soul". As he went about his business, he took reams of notes recording the treatments he carried out for local villagers using star-charts and elixirs.

"While complaints ranged from heartbreak to toothache, many came to Napier with concerns of having been bewitched by a neighbour," said Carter. "Clients used Napier as a sounding board for these fears, asking him for confirmation from the stars or for amulets to protect them against harm."

These records give an important new perspective on witchcraft belief in the 17th century, as most surviving documents dealing with the subject are legal records, while these notes were intended solely for Napier's personal use. Carter found that only 2.5 per cent of Napier's cases involved suspected bewitchments, but nonetheless these totalled 1,714 witchcraft accusations between 1597 and 1634. Among 960 suspects, 855 were women

and 105 men, and most of the accusations were made by women.

Carter has found that the occupations of the accused were key to whether they were vulnerable to the accusation of witchcraft. The primary activities women were involved in were healthcare, childcare, dairy production or livestock care which made them "the first line of defence" against death or disease. Men, however, mainly worked with things like iron, fire or stone, which were less closely linked with natural decay. "Natural processes of decay were viewed as 'corruption'. Corrupt blood made wounds rankle and corrupt milk made foul cheese," says Carter, and as women worked in areas much more vulnerable to death, disease or spoilage, they put themselves at greater risk of being accused of making these happen unnaturally through witchcraft. Women were also more likely to have several jobs, so moved between homes, bakehouses, wells, and marketplaces: "They worked not just in one high-risk sector, but in many at once. It stacked the odds against them," says Carter. "England's mid-17th century witch trials saw hundreds of women executed within the space of three years. Every Hallowe'en we are reminded that the stereotypical witch is a woman. Historically, the riskiness of 'women's work' may be part of the reason why." *BBC News, 20 Sept 2023.*



SIDELINES...

SKELETON CREW

Describing an incident in Long Eaton, Derbyshire, a police spokesperson said, "The force was called by a concerned member of the public who reported they had found what appeared to be a human skeleton in a bush in their garden... an officer attended the home, where it was found that the skeleton was in fact a plastic toy pirate skeleton." It came complete with a skeletal parrot on its shoulder and a hook for a hand. The spokesperson added: "Officers left the toy to be disposed of by the homeowner." *BBC News*, 6 Apr 2023.

FBI FAIL

FBI agents in Boston, Massachusetts, carrying out a training exercise, kicked down the wrong door and handcuffed a Delta Airlines pilot instead of the person playing their target. They interrogated him for more than an hour, including pushing him into the shower, before he could persuade them they had made a mistake. "Safety is always a priority of the FBI, and our law enforcement partners, and we take these incidents very seriously," said a spokesperson. *BBC News*, 6 Apr 2023.

CHOCOLATE DIP

Patricia Borges, 50, survived a massive explosion that levelled the RM Palmer chocolate factory in Pennsylvania and killed seven of her co-workers. As the floor of the factory collapsed under her, and with her arm on fire, Borges dived into a vat of liquid chocolate, which protected her from the rest of the factory collapse and extinguished her burning limb. She was rescued alive from under the rubble nine hours later with just minor burns, a broken collarbone and fractured heels. *mirror.co.uk*, 1 Apr 2023.



MARTIN ROSS

STRANGE DAYS

PHANTOM FLINGS

Even supernatural relationships can hit the skids it seems...



©BROCARDE / SWNS

ABOVE: Brocarde, 40, claims she met "devilishly handsome" soldier Edwardo when the ghost "burst" into her bedroom on a stormy night. BELOW AND FACING PAGE: Amanda Large, whose relationship with the ghostly Captain Jack Teague is now over.

SEXY SPIRIT SOLDIER

It was a dark and stormy night when singer-songwriter and Instagram influencer Brocarde, 40, claims she met the ghost of a Victorian soldier named Edwardo, who, she says, suddenly burst into her bedroom in the midst of the tempest, immediately charming her. "After our initial meeting Edwardo slowly revealed more about himself to me. I saw his images as a Victorian soldier, he was always in his uniform...his face is devilishly handsome, shoulder length unruly hair, he looks lived in, well worn, troubled almost, there's a pain attached to his being", she said, adding "His voice is commanding and forceful, yet he whispers to seduce." After a whirlwind romance, Brocarde "married" the ghostly Edwardo at The Asylum Chapel in London on Hallowe'en 2022, but cracks began to show even on their honeymoon in Barry Island, Wales, when, Brocarde says, the ghost apparently became "too drunk". It also seems he rapidly developed a crush on Marilyn Monroe "after spotting her in their wedding



AMANDA TEAGUE
Married a 500 year old pirate ghost

chapel" and would then vanish for days at a time, apparently returning smelling of Chanel No 5, Monroe's famed choice of perfume. At the same time, she says, he was also becoming jealous of Brocarde's Instagram followers and increasingly possessive: "I came to the conclusion that the journey with Edwardo had no positive conclusion and his energy was dragging me down... There was no breakup conversation. I consulted a psychic medium to help me assert my boundaries over Edwardo and to try to tame him, but it didn't work." Edwardo apparently responded

by haunting her with the sound of a screaming baby. Finally, in 2023, Brocarde returned to the chapel where she and Edwardo had married for an exorcism that she believed had finally purged the abusive spirit from her life. "I haven't felt his presence or seen him, the whole energy has shifted, and life feels more light and joyful. I am quite adamant that I no longer want to be haunted by Edwardo, so his presence isn't welcome in my life," she said, going on to release a song about the whole experience.

It seems, however, that Edwardo was not quite done



with Brocard. After their "divorce", Brocard treated herself to a trip to Paris, where, after seeing his reflection in a puddle by the Seine, she was courted by a "French ghost" calling himself "Fabienne". She was initially excited by the prospect of a new spirit lover; however, she says "He later revealed himself as Edwardo - it was a honey trap all along. I couldn't believe I'd been catfished by a ghost." Following the experience, she has resolved only to date corporeal men, but has found Edwardo jealous and hard to shake off. "I returned home from a date with a bunch of flowers, and Edwardo thought it would be amusing to pull the heads off all of the roses and scatter the petals on my bed. He's even learnt to play 'Careless Whisper' on the saxophone - I mean, at least I think it's him. The sound echoes in the distance sometimes when I'm taking a bath in candlelight," she says. She claims he also startled her with a modern style "Ken" makeover: "I thought I was going crazy when the image of him with cropped blond hair and a pink suit appeared. I could tell it was him, though, as his gaunt harrowed eyes locked into mine and slowly he merged back into a rugged Victorian soldier."

Despite a psychic telling Brocard she is permanently stuck with Edwardo's ghost, she says, "I feel now I'm not consenting to Edwardo's presence and I'm having trouble getting him to disconnect from me. Moving forward, I feel like I need a bit of flesh on my bones. Skeletons and dead men may seem hot, but in reality, they are stone cold, unpredictable and scary." [dailymail.co.uk](https://www.dailymail.co.uk), 17 Jul; [mirror.co.uk](https://www.mirror.co.uk), 29 Sept.

GOODBYE SAILOR

Amanda Large, from Ireland, might have been able to warn Brocard that dallying with ghosts was a bad idea. She claims to have married the ghost of a pirate named "Captain Jack Teague", whom she met in 2014 (FT370:8-9), and that relationship did not prosper either. The ghostly pirate introduced himself by appearing beside Large as she



"Skeletons and dead men may seem hot, but in reality they are cold and scary"

lay in bed, resembling, she said, Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, although, "He is black, so he is not the same colour as Johnny Depp. But he is dark skinned and has very dark jet-black hair, so he tells me." Initially, Large says, sex with the ghost was the best she'd ever had, but later admitted that it was extremely physically exhausting, which was putting a strain on their relationship. Eventually, she felt it was draining all her energy and making her seriously ill, so she reluctantly ended their 'marriage'.

Looking back, she says, "I certainly have learnt a lot about myself and what I want and don't want," and would not recommend anyone else getting romantically involved with non-corporeal entities. "I think it's dangerous, as you don't know what you're getting into and you can get taken advantage of very easily," she says. Like Brocard, she has returned to dating mortal men. [mirror.co.uk](https://www.mirror.co.uk), 19 Oct 2021

SIDELINES...

QUIET TOWN

In Orkney, Scotland, police issued a statement reading: "We were made aware of a guinea pig which had been put through a window and into a property at Meadowbank in Kirkwall shortly after 12.40am on Thursday, April 27. The guinea pig was removed and was unhurt. It has since been returned to its owner." [orkadian.co.uk](https://www.orkadian.co.uk), 27 Apr 2023

NOT HER DAY

In Hackettstown, New Jersey, a 61-year-old woman forgot to put her automatic car in "park" when she stopped and when she got out it began to roll backwards. As she tried to stop it, she fell under the vehicle, which then ran her over and hit another car. Called by onlookers, police arrived at the scene with paramedics, who took the woman to hospital with non-life-threatening injuries, while officers issued her with a summons "for having an unregistered vehicle". [metro.co.uk](https://www.metro.co.uk), 3 May 2023.

SHOCKINGLY DUMB

After being bitten by his pet rattlesnake for the 15th time, a 28-year-old man from Arizona decided to treat the bite with electric shock, as on previous occasions he'd reacted badly to antivenom. Aided by a neighbour, he connected wires from his lips to the battery in a car that was then revved to 3,000rpm. He lost consciousness immediately and paramedics found him "unconscious and incontinent of stool." He was rushed to hospital where he was treated for electric shock and snakebite and given plastic surgery to reconstruct his lips. Contrary to popular belief in the US, electric shock is completely ineffective against snakebite. [livescience.com](https://www.livescience.com), 12 Apr 2023

GOTO JAIL

Annoyed by four people playing a noisy game of Monopoly at 5am on the pavement outside the r house in Brussels, Belgium, a neighbour came out waving a stick and became embroiled in an argument with the players. His son then followed, brandishing a Japanese katana sword which led to the argument escalating into a scuffle during which one of the Monopoly players grabbed the sword, injuring his hand, then attacked its owner with it, putting him in hospital with life-threatening injuries. [news.sky.com](https://www.news.sky.com), 5 Apr 2023.



SIDELINES...

NOT DEAD YET

A passenger on a train passing through Lincolnshire called police after spotting what they believed to be an "ill or even dead" person collapsed in a field near Swayfield, between Grantham and Stamford. Several officers and a drone pilot were sent to the rescue, but on arrival they discovered that the "victim" was, in fact, a scarecrow that had toppled over. "Uprighted and given some bird scaring tips along with some jolly good words of advice, he was allowed to get back to work," tweeted the police. *ITV News, 21 Mar 2023.*

GORILLA CONFUSION

After ten years as a much-loved entrance feature of Reynard Nursery in Carlisle, Lanarkshire, Gary, an 8ft (2.4m) fibreglass gorilla, was stolen on the night of 20 March by several men who unbolted him from the ground and loaded him into a white van. Baffled owner Andrew Scott said: "I mean what are they going to do with him? He's huge and old and not very discreet." Following nationwide publicity, police were flooded with reports of Gary being driven down the M1 and M40 on a trailer, but this turned out to be a completely different 8ft fibreglass gorilla and Gary has yet to turn up. *glasgowlive.co.uk, 21 Mar; BBC News, 9 Apr 2023.*

MMM... CRISPY!

McDonalds apologised after an advertisement for their McCrispy burger was put up on a bus stop next to a sign pointing to the Penmount Crematorium in Truro, Cornwall. A local said: "How funny it will probably depend on how long ago you followed the crematorium sign wearing a black tie." McDonalds had the ad swiftly removed. *Sun, 8 Feb 2023*



BOOM-BANG-A-BANG

Mystery sounds from around the world

MYSTERY BLASTS

Residents of North Kingstown, Rhode Island, USA, have been disturbed at least once a month by mysterious "booms" and "explosions" that have shredded nerves and terrified children. Faith Ferris said, "It shakes my whole house. I grew up on a military base in Oklahoma, and it really does sound like testing explosives or some sort of bomb," adding, "There's something weird going on." After hearing a massive explosion one Sunday, Dawn Souza, who lives adjacent to a golf course in the town, said, "It just seemed unusual, very unusual. It was horrifying, I was scared to death, and I looked out towards the golf course thinking I'd see an explosion. No smoke, nothing at all." Police and federal authorities admitted to being baffled as they had been unable to find any trace of an explosion, nor identify who was responsible.

Similarly, South Carolina was shaken by a mystery boom on the morning of 23 May, captured on a Nest doorbell camera in Mount Pleasant at 8.40am, although there were also reports from Greenville, Columbia and Charleston. Emergency services took to Twitter to reassure residents, saying, "We have no reports of any earthquakes at this time. We're working to determine the source." The US Geological Survey discounted quakes as the source and NASA said there had been no spacecraft re-entering the atmosphere, while Coastguards denied that an offshore military exercise taking place at the time was responsible. The Geological Survey likewise absolved earthquakes of responsibility for a massive earth-shaking "thud" that disconcerted people in Upper Macungie Township, Pennsylvania, on 25 August, that was strong enough to shake objects off the wall in some houses. Police, inevitably, were baffled and appealed for information from anyone who might be able to clarify the situation. Previously, in 2021, it was suggested that



ABOVE: The sound of one of the Wallingford bangs, along with a brief flash, was captured on CCTV by local pub landlord Dave Howse (below).

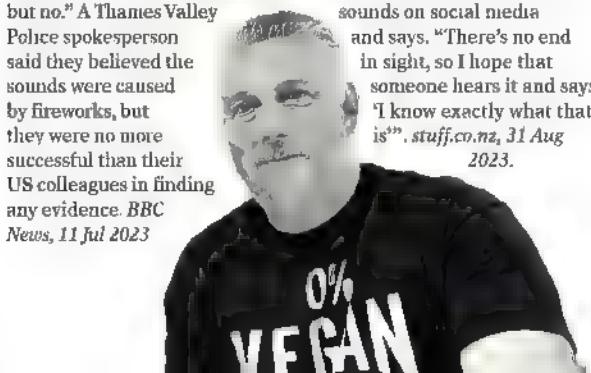
mystery sounds elsewhere in Pennsylvania originated from natural underground openings in the limestone karst that underlies much of the State, but it seems no one suggested that this time. *abc6.com, 15 Feb; foxweather.com, 23 May; wfmy.com, 25 Aug 2023.*

WALLINGFORD WHAMMY

Wallingford in Oxfordshire, famed as the location for the TV detective series *Midsomer Murders*, has been beset by mysterious bangs. Between 2 and 8 July, a series of bangs throughout the night repeatedly woke residents, with at least five separate incidents reported. Pub landlord Dave Howse said: "They're very loud bangs that have echoed through the building, shook windows. The first time we heard it we thought someone had actually driven through the pub. It's very disruptive – nobody likes getting woken up in panic mode, because you don't know what's going on." Howse captured one of the bangs on his CCTV, accompanied by a brief flash, while fellow Wallingford resident Pam Paddock believes she saw a puff of smoke after another, saying, "We thought maybe there's some cannon going off, but no." A Thames Valley Police spokesperson said they believed the sounds were caused by fireworks, but they were no more successful than their US colleagues in finding any evidence. *BBC News, 11 Jul 2023.*

AUCKLAND HAMMER

Families in Selwyn Crescent in Auckland, New Zealand, have been constantly disturbed by a mysterious sound described as "mechanical hammering" since July. Starting around 5pm most nights, the sounds continue until at least midnight and have been so loud that they have been physically shaking the house closest to their apparent point of origin. Its owner, David Howe (whose name is only one letter away from that of Wallingford's suffering pub landlord) says, "It's a real problem – it's getting everyone very stressed." Neighbour Lizzie Oakes added: "At some point I heard this banging, like someone had come home from shift work and decided to work on their house in the middle of the night." Council noise control officers failed to track down the source of the sound, but homed in on storm water pipes that run close to the worst affected area; however, after inserting inspection cameras into the pipe, they were left none the wiser. Howe believes the noises are sounds from a building site travelling up the pipes, but finding the source has been impossible. He has posted a video featuring the sounds on social media and says, "There's no end in sight, so I hope that someone hears it and says, 'I know exactly what that is'". *stuff.co.nz, 31 Aug 2023.*



SERIOUSLY STRANGE

STU NEVILLE tears himself away from the telly to report on this year's ASSAP conference in Bath

Every year, the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena (ASSAP) convenes in its own, very particular manner, with members from the length and breadth of these islands (and further afield) concentrating their ASSAPness into a phenomenological singularity where its denizens discuss the wonderful world of the weird, in between bouts of chat, catching up, medium-weight networking and borderline frolics.

So, on a bright, warm September morning a host of weirdness aficionados descended upon Bath University, having first negotiated the carpark and campus, the like of which has not been seen in terms of complexity since *The Krypton Factor* (or possibly *The Crystal Maze*), ready to have our horizons expanded, minds blown and various parts tickled. There was a flurry of hellos – many of us, though familiar with one another online, had never met in person – as we all funnelled into The Edge auditorium, collected badges and took our seats as ASSAP Chair CJ Romer opened with a tribute to the late Robert Moore (see obit FT43:28). Robert, aside from having been ASSAP Vice Chair for many years was as well known to many of us for his contribution to British ufology, and the short film by Kristian Lander touchingly reminded us that fortuna has lost a quietly important figure; his loss to ASSAP greater still.

Respects paid, proceedings got underway. With Steve Parsons ably MC'ing for the day, Neil Nixon kicked off with an exploration of ASSAP's core mission, swiftly followed by Parsons himself discussing how the rise of AI has necessitated the need to adapt investigation techniques. Ann Winsper shared a thought-provoking meditation on consciousness, the Matrix and glitches therein and how this could provide a rationale for some ghostly phenomena.

We continued with Stephen Volk, to his own relief not, for once, talking about *Ghostwatch* but instead the somewhat



ABOVE: Gomez, Lurch and Fester, aka Peter Laws, Stu Neville and Richard Freeman – some of the FT stalwarts at the conference

overlooked series *Afterlife* (see FT203:36-40). Next up was Anthony Peake, presenting some fascinating coincidences (synchronicities?) concerning JB Priestley, JW Dunne, the BBC's *Monitor* and a little bit of Philip K Dick.

Following swiftly behind, the redoubtable Prof Chris French spoke about sleep paralysis, night-terrors, night hags, alien abduction and other things intimial to a restful night's slumber. With the assembled crowd by now questioning their understanding of reality (a good start to any conference) – and following a swift injection of lunch – it was back to the auditorium for the panel discussion, a paranormal audience *Question Time*, then on to Prof Cal Cooper and his flotation tank, telepathy experiments at the University of Northampton (as per usual, quite a lot of misses and near misses but some startling hits), and Beth Darlington Bailey on the essential checks you have to make when investigating paranormal phenomena. The day was rounded off by former Black Museum staffer Lindsey Siviter on the Ghosts of Scotland Yard, after which the members disassembled in preparation for an evening's food, chat and de-

bauchery (I'd imagine so anyway, I'd gone home owing to middle-aged lightweight knackeredness. You'll have to ask Peter Laws just how depraved it was).

Bright-eyed and bushy tailed the next morning (well, I was anyway), we were greeted by CJ Romer opening day two with a chat about experimentation with ghosts, followed by Kev Kerr's causes of common hauntings and Matt Arnold on how definitions of demons are all very much contextual (you say potato, I say Pazuzu – yes, I've been saying that one), and then our very own Rev Peter Laws with the extraordinary career of exorcist Donald Omard.

Next up was ASSAP luminary Caroline McKendrick with personal anecdotes of cases she has investigated that triggered strong suspicions of fakery (and the motivations behind them), followed by Dr Delyth Badder on the legacy of the Welsh folklorist Reverend Edmund Jones. Our minds now full of the Celtic aethereal, we broke for a spot of lunch before heading back in for Dr Jack Hunter on the paranormal and the natural history of mind, and Kariu Beasant on heritage locations, the paranormal and ethics (an important discussion in the post-*Most Haunted*

era). After this, a slightly random and slambolic examination of the Patterson Bigfoot film by an overlarge television reviewer (ahem) followed by an inappropriately structured and delivered talk about how folklore unlocks the supernatural landscape by Bethan Briggs Miller and John G Sabol Jr's enthusiastic explanation of 'Staging Afterlife' (re-creating conditions in a haunted hotel to habituate spirits).

Then came Richard Freeman with his eye-opening account of Orang-Pendek hunting – he's braved tigers, privation and dangerous curries in the name of research – before the conference was rounded off by Dr Amethyst Gray on the *Titanic: Myths and Reality*.

All in all, it was a packed, fascinating and multidisciplinary event, which nonetheless kept within the parameters of ASSAP's mission statement, acknowledging that whatever the objective realities, people experience weird stuff, and, as every talk demonstrated, attempts at empathetic understanding will always bring more stimulating and useful data than ideological objections.

Above all else, though, it's bloody good fun – roll on next year's event!

PAUL DEVEREUX unearths ancient engineering feats, drought-exposed petroglyphs and more



ABOVE LEFT One of the Orkney tomb's side chambers containing 5,000-year-old articulated skeletons. ABOVE RIGHT Face carvings on the drought-exposed boulder on the Rio Negro in Brazil. BELOW The phallic statue found at Karahantepe in southeast Turkey



REUTERS SILVIA RODRIGUES

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

NEOLITHIC ENGINEERING

The Orkney Isles, off the northernmost coast of mainland Scotland, possess an exceptional range of prehistoric monuments indicative of the islands' importance in Neolithic times.

Now a further remarkable one has been discovered near Holm, Orkney Mainland, that has been hidden from modern eyes, being flattened and largely cannibalised for its stones over centuries and covered by topsoil. This extraordinary discovery happened more or less by chance when a minor 19th-century reference was noted during other literature research by Dr Hugo Anderson-Whymark of Scotland's National Museum. He and Professor Vicki Cummings from Cardiff University led a team to precisely locate and conduct an excavation of the almost lost monument. What they unearthed was beyond their widest expectations.

The feature had enough surviving structure for the archaeologists to be able to work out the overall outline of a tomb over 15m (49ft) across, accessed by a 7m (23ft)-long passage. It contained a rectangular stone-built central chamber with six skilfully constructed stone side-chambers or cells with curved backs. In one of these there was what Anderson-Whymark calls "the icing on the cake": 14 articulated skeletons (two of them seemingly positioned in an embrace). Only DNA examination will tell if they belong to one clan – and who knows what else such study of this astonishing find will reveal?

Regarding the cleverly built stonework in the cells, Anderson-Whymark commented: "They really are engineering feats. The tomb would have been an immense feature in the landscape when it was originally constructed, and the stonework inside would have been very impressive." *The Observer (Scotland)*, 21 Oct 2023.



PREHISTORIC FLASHES

Karahantepe is a neighbouring Neolithic site to Göbeklitepe (Göbekli Tepe) in southeast Turkey. Recent excavations there have revealed a 2.3m-tall (7.6ft) rock-hewn statue with a fairly naturalistic facial expression. The graven figure depicts a somewhat cheeky chapie proudly holding his phallus in both hands.

Göbeklitepe is around 12,000 years old but the suspicion is that the less famous Karahantepe might be even older. Excavations have been ongoing for years at both sites and remarkable finds are being made, offering tantalising glimpses of some bizarre goings-on at the dawn of modern human history. *archaeonews.net*, 1 Nov 2023.

WHAT LAY BENEATH

An exceptionally severe Amazonian drought, possibly linked to climate change, has dramatically and drastically reduced water levels on the Rio Negro near its confluence with the Amazon river at Manaus, Brazil, revealing riverbed boulders containing about 100 petroglyphs depicting human faces. Local ethnological evidence indicates that these carvings are between 1,000 and 2,000

years old. They had been briefly glimpsed centuries ago, but now are on full view. Most of the carved faces are oval and look basically naturalistic even if somewhat schematic, but some are square and probably represent masks (in this columnist's humble opinion). *BBC News*, 24 Oct 2023.

IS THERE ANYONE THERE?

The Te'omim Cave ("The Twins Cave") is a large karst (eroded limestone) cave in the mountains about 20 miles (30km) west of Jerusalem. Because of its karst nature, the cave is festooned with stalactites and other calcite forms, and contains a seam of rare abaster, plus a deep shaft at its end. It is open to tourists for part of the year, but more importantly it's a rich archaeological site yielding a wide range of finds spanning multiple prehistoric and historic eras. One particularly interesting set of finds, made several years ago, consisting of over 100 oil lamps and three human craniums, among other items, deliberately lodged in difficult-to-access folds and crevices in the cave walls, have been dated to between the second and fourth centuries AD – during Roman occupation of the region. The nature of these artefacts now, in a recent paper, leads researchers to reckon they were associated with necromancy ("death magic"), carried out to communicate with the dead. Various populations had mixed in with the Romans during this period, bringing some pagan-tinged traditions with them, such as necromancy, even though it was officially frowned upon by the Roman Empire. The cave would have been an ideal location for a necromantic oracle (*nekyomantelon*) with its eerie calcite forms in flickering lamp light and the deep shaft being viewed as a connection to the underworld. *Harvard Theological Review*, 4 July 2023. doi: 10.1017/S0017816023000214



CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

291: BIBLICAL BADDIES

"I have noted much that has impressed upon my mind the thought that religionists have taken over many phenomena, as exclusively their own – have colored and discredited with their emotional explanations – but that someday some of these occurrences will be rescued from theological interpretations... I incline to the acceptance of many stories of miracles, but think that these miracles would have occurred, if this earth had been inhabited by atheists" – Fort, *Books*, p965

Given the countless hewings-asunder and massacres he ordered, Jehovah easily takes first place. Most exotic and remembered of Old Testament malefactors tend to be women. True, no shortage of these in classical Greece, Rome, and Byzantium, but you don't need to be a feminist to wonder about male bias in the sources.

Our two leading ladies were Jehovah's gift to modern pop music. Think Frankie Laine & Jezebel – also Iron & Wine's version with altered lyrics. Think Tom Jones & Delilah, not forgetting her appearance in Elvis's 'Hard-Headed Woman'. Tom Jones may usher her in: "My, my, my Delilah / Why, why, why Delilah / I could see, that girl was no good for me / But I was lost like a slave that no man could free."

Older readers may remember *Samson & Delilah* (1949) with Victor Mature, who retained his famous single expression even when blinded, and Hedy Lamarr, equally famous for her groundbreaking nude scene in *Ecstasy* and wartime radio-hopping inventions to foil German torpedoes.

According to the biblical account (Judges 16), Samson was captivated by Delilah. Seeing this, each Philistine leader offered her 1,100 pieces of silver if she could wrangle from him how to nullify his strength. Pretty good fee for what turned out to be a haircut – perhaps outdoing those commanded by Vidal Sassoon and 'Mr Teasy-Weasy'. Taking this money has caused Delilah to be branded a whore, but she may simply have calculated that any man who could kill 1,000 men with the jawbone of an ass should be a good shag.

On the whole, thinking of Ralab who concealed the Israelite spies, and Tamar who posed as one, prostitutes get a perhaps surprisingly good Old Testament press.

No need to spell out the famous Samson-Delilah story. Our strong man should have heeded Elvis: "Now Samson told Delilah loud and clear, Keep your cotton pickin'



fingers out my curly hair."

What happened to Delilah is unknown. Not so Jezebel. As Frankie Laine lamented: "If ever the Devil was born without a pair of horns, it was you, Jezebel, it was you." In Jewish eyes, her sin lay in promoting the worship of Baal, persecuting Jehovah's priests, and procuring the death of an innocent landowner who would not sell his property to her husband, King Ahab. For these transgressions, she met a fearsome end: thrown from a tower and eaten by dogs. As Iron & Wine put it: "And who's seen Jezebel? Her blouse on the ground where the dogs were hungry, roaming."

Becoming canine chow was not a fate unique to her. Irreverent playwright Euripides and Lucian 'The Anti-Christ' satirist are also awarded this fate by their biographers. The jury seems to be out over whether Kim Jong Un had his uncle put naked into a cage with ravening Rovers.

A biblically nameless naughty is the wife of palace guard captain Potiphar who tries to lure Joseph into giving her a good seeing-to. Upon his gallant refusal ("No good deed goes unpunished"), she cried 'Rape', causing hubby to have Joseph imprisoned until he caught the Pharaoh's attention by the convenient gift of interpreting fellow-prisoners' dreams. What happened to Mrs P seems unknown.

Out with the Old, in with the New. Salome has had too harsh a press. It was mother Herodias who told her to demand John the Baptist's head on a platter, because he had denounced her marriage as adulterous. The Gospel accounts (Mark 6.21-29; Matthew 14.6-11) mention her dancing, but not her name; Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.5.4) does the reverse.

As for her 'Dance of the Seven Veils', thus seems an invention of Wilde's play *Salome*. If you want an exotic veiled *danseuse*, the sinuous damsel's 'Sand Dance' in the old variety act of Wilson, Keppel, & Betty –

quite the strangest thing I ever saw on stage – is a better bet.

"What is truth? said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer" (Francis Bacon, 1561-1626, 'Essay on Truth').

Those misguided souls who try to minimise the Gospels' historicity cannot jettison Pilate – Pilatus is a very rare Roman cognomen. His existence and gubernatorial office are confirmed by a Latin inscription found in 1961, whilst Tacitus (*Annals* 15. 44) specifies that Christ was crucified during his tenure. It is less easy to discern how the Gospel writers knew the exact words of the Christ-Pilate conversations – perhaps leaked by one of the attendant officials?

Various non-Testamental sources claim Pilate committed suicide under Caligula in AD 37, giving various burial places after the river Rhine had spewed back his body. Some would like to see him as conscience-stricken; others link it with his apparent dismissal in AD 36 by Tiberius. Pilate is venerated as a saint in the Ethiopian Church, a consequence of the notion that by sanctioning Christ's death he had assisted God's divine plan – the sort of logic that would have appealed to Mr Spock.

Same applies to Judas's betrayal. Of interest is his name Iscariot, perhaps to be connected with the Latin word *sicarius* = 'dagger-man', thereby connecting him with Jewish anti-Roman movements. Similarly linked are Barabbas and the 'thieves' on their companion crosses. Thus, one possible motive for Judas's action – unless he simply wanted the money – is that he wanted rid of Jesus as a possible rival guerrilla leader.

Of especial fortean interest are the discrepant and lurid accounts of his death. Rival New Testament versions have him either hang himself or suddenly burst apart with gushing entrails. Later pious embellishments have his body swell so much he could not walk between buildings, with similar genital enlargement accompanied by pus and worms, leading to suicide by pouring out his entrails on to the ground which still stank 100 years later.

Even more comic is the tale that he told his wife he was going to hang himself since Jesus was going to rise from the dead and punish him. Wifey laughingly said he could no more resurrect than the chicken she was cooking, whereupon said fowl re-animated with a cock-crow and Judas rushed off to suspend himself.

Hey, Jude. .

Alan Turing & the Philosopher's Stone

DAVID HAMBLING explains how computer algorithms and AI can help us crack ancient codes

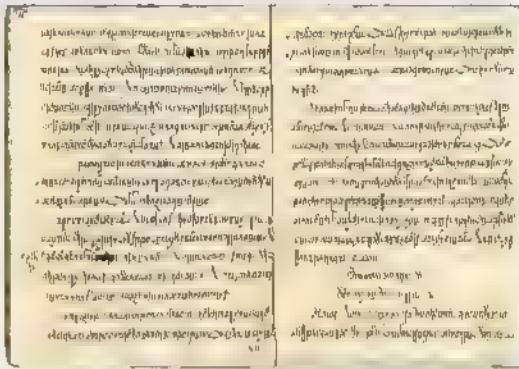
In ancient times, the wise used codes to conceal secret knowledge from those who were not considered worthy. Now the code crackers have a powerful new ally in the form of AI, and centuries-old documents are yielding their secrets.

Ciphers date back at least to ancient Greece, and were well known to the Romans. According to Suetonius, Julius Caesar used one for sensitive military communications around 58 BC, shifting each letter three places in the alphabet, so A was replaced with D, B with E and so on. The Caesar cipher, as it became known, was not solved until the ninth century when the Arabic mathematician Al-Kindi developed the technique known as frequency analysis. For example, in English-language documents the three most common letters are E, T and A in that order. The three commonest letters in the ciphered document are likely to correspond to these; with a little juggling the crypto-analyst can work out which is which and get the rest of the letters.

Codemakers developed a range of other techniques to make their work harder to crack. In a *De la Poer* cipher, rather than shifting every letter by the same number, a key, often a word or phrase, can indicate how many letters to shift each letter in the text to be encoded.

By the 20th century, mechanical encoding devices like the famous Enigma machine appeared to produce unbreakable codes. However, the team at Bletchley Park, led by mathematician Alan Turing, showed that new computing devices able to check far more combinations than humans alone could break even these.

But some older documents remained opaque. For example Arthur Dee, an alchemist like his famous father John Dee, left a ciphered text titled "Marrow of the Hermetic Philosophy" complete with a cipher table, promising the secret of the philosopher's stone. He didn't supply the necessary key though, or so the cryptanalysts working on the problem thought. An Australian mathematician, Richard Bean, solved the puzzle manually in 2021. It was only later it was discovered that the original copy of Dee's manuscript had something written on the back, not in the digital copy: a 45-letter Latin phrase meaning "like a new Jason you will carry the Golden Fleece away from the lucky



LEFT: Two pages from the Copiale Cipher

Codemakers developed a range of techniques to make their work harder to crack

Colchian." (The stealing of the Golden Fleece was a popular metaphor for alchemy.)

This was the key which Bean had worked out the hard way. The deciphered text revealed that the trick to making the philosopher's stone is to heat an alchemical egg in a special type of slow oven for a set period of time, depending on whether the desired product is a silver tincture or the elixir which makes gold. What it does not reveal is how to obtain an alchemical egg, showing that Dee was a very cautious man indeed. Presumably, readers have to go on a quest like Dan Brown characters to find and solve a series of puzzles to get their reward in the final chapter.

Some ciphers are written in symbols rather than letters. Each symbol may represent a letter, but some can stand for syllables or common words or names. There may also be various 'nulls' or meaningless characters thrown in as well to confuse, and 'de.ete' characters which indicate that the previous or following character should be ignored. Things step up a level with polyphonic ciphers in which a symbol represents several letters.

Other techniques to confound cryptanalysts include switching the first and last letter of each word during the coding process, and super encryption in which the encrypted message is itself encrypted a second time, so that the first decoding produces gibberish.

Knowing what language the original text is in is a huge boost; without this, frequency analysis is useless. The Copiale Cipher, an 18th-century text bound in green and gold, presented quite a challenge, as it was written in a combination of accented and unaccented Roman and Greek letters. The analysts decided that the original language was probably German (the manuscript was found in Berlin) and that the unaccented Roman letters indicated the start of each word.

A computer algorithm then used the brute force approach of trying a large number of possible cipher keys until a German-language document emerged. The manuscript turned out to be instructions for the secret initiation ritual of the Illuminated Order of Oculists, an offshoot of the Masons which used a metaphor of vision rather than construction in its rituals. The initiation involved a number of trials including reading a blank piece of paper and having a single eyebrow hair plucked.

Cryptanalysts working on a number of these historical mysteries have banded together to form the DECRYPT project (which can be found at de-crypt.org). Their aim is to automate the process of deciphering historical manuscripts. DECRYPT make digital versions of thousands of historical documents available online – diplomatic correspondence, private diaries and manuscripts relating to secret societies – as well as tools for the transcription of texts and advanced machine learning algorithms to decipher them.

DECRYPT's most celebrated success to date has been decoding letters from Mary Queen of Scots. It might be worth mentioning that Queen Elizabeth's spymaster Walsingham decoded some of Mary's correspondence at the time. This gave Walsingham the evidence he needed to have her executed; we do not know if he had help from John Dee who was clearly an expert.

As the DECRYPT team note, there are still thousands of known undeciphered documents, and probably far more gathering dust in libraries and archives. One day, decoding them may be as easy as firing up an app and pointing your smartphone. Then even the enigmatic Voynich Manuscript will be decoded – and maybe then we will find out where to get an alchemical egg...



INSANE CLOWN POSSE

Hallowe'en unleashes prospective Pennywises, creepy caretakers and a professor with a face painting fetish

FROM HELL TO SKELMORLIE

In the run-up to Hallowe'en the village of Skelmorlie in North Ayrshire, Scotland, was haunted by a 'killer clown', allegedly terrifying residents. Wearing a costume reminiscent of Stephen King's evil clown Pennywise, with white gloves, a lace collar and big red fluffy buttons coupled with a scary mask and makeup, he was rarely sighted by locals, but left red balloons dotted round the village at night and ran a Facebook account under the name "Cole Deimos". This documented his activities, complete with photographs showing him posing at night around the village, often holding one of the balloons and staring at the screen with a hideous grimace across his face. In one image he can be seen creeping across a bridge in the village on all fours.

On his Facebook page "Deimos" claims to come from Hell, Michigan, to live in Skelmorlie, and to have attended clown school, saying "This clown doesn't want fame, glory or gold. He just wants to play in this so-called 'sleepy town'. So, come and join in and learn to fear the Skelmorlie clown." In response to concerned media coverage of his manifestations he posted "Do you think that I care? They'd have to catch me first anyway – and yes, that's a dare." However, when contacted, Police Scotland did not seem concerned, saying, "Police have not received any reports." It seems that not all the locals are terrified either; one Facebook user wrote, "Out of all the clowns in this village he's the best." [news.sky.com](https://www.news.sky.com), 13 Oct 2023.

TIKTOK TASER CLOWN

Amersfoort, in the Netherlands, was haunted by another social media clown stalking the streets for Hallowe'en, this time posting clips of his escapades on TikTok. In scenes that may have been staged, the clown can be seen confronting and scaring people in the streets of the small town, including chasing a car containing a group of screaming



TOP AND ABOVE This Facebook-happy clown has not really been scaring the good folk of Skelmorlie, Ayrshire, despite his best efforts BELOW Assistant professor and face paint fetishist Joseph Tokosh recruited female students to satisfy his needs

girls. Police here were taking an interest, instructing officers to "keep an eye on the situation" having realised that "the sound of an object similar to an electroshock weapon" can be heard in the clown's footage. This caused concern that he could be carrying a taser or similar electric shock weapon and might use it on someone. The suspicion was later allegedly confirmed by an anonymous woman in a Dutch newspaper report saying, "Suddenly, out of nowhere came that clown with a taser... on the video, you can hear my daughter screaming with her friend. They called the police, and they came right away. Those girls are really scared to death." [mannenpage.nl](https://www.mannenpage.nl), 18 Oct 2023.

YUCKY CARETAKER

A caretaker at the Broken Ground Elementary School in Concord, New Hampshire, was reported to the administration by

made everyone feel "yucky". The caretaker had also posted photos elsewhere showing him wearing his work uniform and holding weapons, which made some teachers feel unsafe about remaining in the school after hours. The school district investigated the caretaker over staff concerns about his behaviour but allowed him to remain in post. patch.com, 23 Oct 2023.

JUST CREEPY

Assistant geography professor Joseph Tokosh resigned from his post at Nicholls State University in Louisiana after student journalists exposed his clown fetish. Tokosh was well known on campus for recruiting female students to help him satisfy it, and often posted openly about his activities on social media saying, "I have a face paint fetish and convince the cute girls in my classes to let me paint their faces." He had previously done the same at Kent State University in Ohio and at Northern Illinois University, offering cash to women willing to let him paint their faces. He would post on social media, saying "Need some extra cash? I will literally pay you to let me practice Halloween makeup on you!". It is alleged he gave better grades to students who let him paint them. Searches of his social media also turned up images of him throwing custard pies (consensually) at women. Tokosh defended his actions saying that face painting was part of his cultural geography



class: "That's an assignment in one of my classes where they actually come up with their own face paint and makeup design inspired by a culture and they implement it." His behaviour caused concern among students, some of whom felt it constituted sexual harassment, after he had approached some about face painting "in an aggressive way". [eu.usatoday.com](https://www.usatoday.com), 1 Sept 2023

Growing up with ghosts

ALAN MURDIE recalls his early interest in ghostly matters and his own family's spooky stories



ALAN MURDIE

ABOVE: Keith and Janet Murdie, the author's parents

Many families preserve their own stories or traditions of a ghost. Dr Christopher Caursen from Canada comments: "There are far more occurring than we will ever know about, and most are probably very weak or minor in scope, lasting a very brief period, or resulting in very minor manifestations that remain as part of family lore, and nothing more." (*Daily Grail*, online 14 Aug 2014)

Reflecting on this during the Christmas season makes me think of my own family and some personal stories and anecdotes related by them in my childhood during the 1970s.

For some reason I was always interested in ghosts from a tender age, but I must stress this was not due to anything my family deliberately or consciously imparted to me during my formative years. We lived in Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk and none

My father saw loss of life not infrequently and so didn't spend time contemplating death longer than obliged to

of my close family expressed any interest in ghostly matters. My family read a lot, enjoying a mixture of factual and fictional books, but certainly nothing on psychic or fantastic topics. If ever the subject of ghosts came up (usually raised by me), I was told there were no such things. Nor can I recall any puzzling personal experience of my own.

Regarding the afterlife, my mother,

Janet Murdie, an infant school teacher, was a conventional Anglican and a regular churchgoer, but definitely a non-believer in ghosts, at least before I was 12. My father, Keith Murdie, was a fireman and saw loss of life not infrequently (in road and farm accidents rather than major fires) and so didn't spend time contemplating death and its aftermath longer than obliged to.

From the perspective of childhood, my parents seemed to be largely focused upon the material here-and-now and the daily round of work and keeping a home together during the 1980s and 1970s. Life often appeared something to be got through rather than enjoyed, apart from Christmas, occasional holidays or engaging in practical hobbies like gardening, cooking and crafts and, in my father's case, weightlifting and fishing.

Both my grandfathers were solidly materialist in outlook, non-churchgoers, save for baptisms, weddings and funerals. Both amusedly dismissed ghosts as fantasies believed in only by children or gullible or muddle-headed adults (which some believers are).

My maternal grandfather, Frederick Mann, was a railwayman and steam train driver, while on my father's side, grandfather Robert Murdie had served as a fitness instructor in the Royal Navy before following a career at the old West Suffolk Hospital as a remedial gymnast (in today's parlance, a physiotherapist) until retirement in 1971. They had no personal stories, but Robert Murdie had as a patient Lionel Arbon, the former caretaker of Borley Rectory, Essex, widely known as 'the Most Haunted House in England'. Arbon spoke rather disparagingly of investigator Harry Price (1881-1948) who rented the rectory out over 1937-38, deploying a team of observers, variously labelling Price as "a strange man" and "a fake". These opinions ossified my grandfather's dismissal of spectral matters.

Other relatives displayed similar nonchalance when it came to ghosts. Aunts, uncles and cousins basically exhibited much the same conventional Anglican outlook concerning an afterlife (the dead survive, but are beyond recall) or, alternatively, took an agnostic stance (we can't know one way or the other).

Altogether, to categorise my family in my early years as sceptics would be a misrepresentation. As with most people, ghosts didn't feature in their daily existence. Consequently, they gave no thought to them, just as intricate bridge game problems don't exist for people who don't play bridge. My fascination was amusedly tolerated since I was a child, fortunately one also interested in many other subjects – astronomy, wildlife, history, judo – that tended to receive more enthusiastic acknowledgement. This is very different from people in cultures which believe the spirit world is never very far away, and certainly just as real as this one, resulting in life becoming absorbed in efforts to navigate and co-ordinate the two realms harmoniously.

From time to time mention arose of deceased family

members, including my maternal grandmother, and my great-grandfather, who died on Christmas Day 1965, whom I was told had "gone to Heaven", along with other more distant departed relatives and neighbours. I can remember no talk of any post-mortem signs of their return. That was until one Sunday morning in June 1973.

It was a fine day that of my sister's christening, being held at St George's Church, Bury St Edmunds. Grandfather Frederick Mann was cycling from his home on Barton Hill in the village of Fornham St Martin, just under a mile away, to our house to join the family gathering ahead of the service. As he reached the bottom of Barton Hill, he saw what he thought was his deceased wife, my grandmother Laura Mann, walking in the direction of the home they had once shared. She had died, aged 60, in September 1964.

This experience on a clear day gave him "quite a turn", to the point he dismounted and watched the figure moving away. He then continued, arriving at our home 15 minutes later, by that stage more puzzled than shaken, and told the story to my mother, who was naturally rather perturbed by it. I remember him telling my mother how the white hair of the woman and the angle she held her head were identical to that of my late

BELOW: The author's maternal grandmother (left) and mother, your future ghost hunter is the infant in the pram

grandmother. However, he explained it away as seeing a living woman who happened to look exactly like his late wife.

This was a perfectly reasonable explanation, though a few years later, I learnt traditions of a ghostly white lady haunting the hill. Nonetheless, in this case, I wonder if it was a personal hallucination triggered by the ceremonial context of the day. My speculation is based on a later recollection of my grandfather mentioning that the last day his wife ever enjoyed a semblance of good health was the day of my own baptism in 1964. The very next day she collapsed, stricken with coronary thrombosis, the intensification of a long-standing heart condition which ended her life six months later. Perhaps heading to the christening of another grandchild, nine years later, dredged up powerful past memories for my grandfather, which were expressed in a vivid hallucination.

Otherwise, there were a handful of occasions when family members reported minor uncanny experiences, including one which led my mother to change her mind over ghosts. This came via my first

ever visit to Borley to see the site of the infamous rectory and its church of unknown dedication. It took place on a Thursday morning at the end of August 1976. To placate my own enthusiasm for ghosts and hauntings, my father drove me and a school friend, David Nunn, the 17 miles over to the famous Essex village, bringing my mother and three-year-old sister along for the ride. On arriving at the church my sister didn't want to go inside, probably scared by talk of ghosts on the way, so my father minded her in the car. Mum, myself and David then walked up the churchyard path and went into the ancient building, in those days unlocked.

Going inside, my mother immediately remarked that she could smell incense, and that they must be 'high church' at Borley. I couldn't smell anything, while my friend later told me he smelt something, but he "didn't know what it was". I smelt nothing, but was immediately struck by a sensation of cold.



ALAN MURDIE

For me, it was like walking into a big meat freezer. I knew what that was like, having accompanied my father to a meat dripping processing and refrigeration plant at Hesket in Suffolk, where he took a second, part-time job. We then wandered around the church, which otherwise had a light and airy feeling, and inspected the Waldegrave monument, its largest memorial. "A nice little church," was my mum's verdict upon Borley as we left after buying the guide for 2p.

The sensation of cold I felt in the church has been reported over many years. However, it is explicable by the presence of an antique crypt prone to flooding running beneath the building. Bricked up in 1920 by the Revd. Harry Bull, this crypt was not rediscovered until 1988, when a portion of a grave monument on the east side collapsed, uncovering steps down to a sealed entrance.

The presence of a large, cold and damp space directly beneath the stone floor of the church creates the equivalent of a giant refrigeration effect. Accordingly the odd noises heard over the years (and recorded on tape) might easily arise from flood and rainwater affecting the foundations and dislodging earth, bricks and even coffins below, with the resultant sounds all being amplified and echoing through the large chamber. Further noises would be generated whenever water drained away. The later drying out of old timbers could produce creaking and cracking sounds, all then re-imagined as paranormal noises when heard by visitors in the church above.

Thus, much reported at Borley Church may have natural causes, but this does not so easily explain other audial phenomena like organ music and distinct human voices, nor strange smells like incense. For although we did not know it at the time, the smell of incense was one of the reported Borley phenomena.

Some 20 months later, in April 1978, I was reading a copy of *The Ghosts of Borley* (1978) by Peter Underwood and Paul Tabori, lent to me by a friend of my father. On page 181, the book describes how writer James Turner (1908-1975), who lived in the coach house at Borley, experienced an unexplained smell of incense inside the church on several occasions. My mother also read this book and was a little shocked upon finding this passage. She never went back to Borley, but duly



ABOVE: The interior of Borley Church, where feelings of cold and phantom organ music have been reported. BELOW: The book that changed the author's mother's mind about ghosts

changed her opinions on ghosts.

By that time I had returned several times, though hopes for joining any more serious investigations, such as overnight vigils in the church, were precluded. The reasons were apparent on our 1978 visit, from examining the entries in the church visitors' book where some people had written stupid and offensive things ranging from "Not much room for a disco" to "We follow one whose number is 666". The rector, the Revd Ernest Brown, became concerned the church was serving as a magnet for cranks and dabblers attracted to dark occultism. These fears were confirmed by a midnight incursion in February 1978 by punk musician Dave Vanian of The Damned and cronies, disrupting an overnight vigil by a party of American ghost hunters given permission to stake out the building, as reported in the *East Anglian Daily Times* of 20 June 1978 under the headline "Midnight arrival of man in black upsets ghost hunters' vigil at Borley Church". Thereafter, the church was placed permanently off

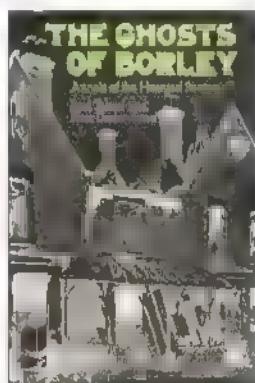
limits to investigators, and then closed even to casual visitors. It gets all the more interesting with the identification of the disturbed American party as the Connecticut-based 'Foundation for Christian Psychic Research', which is mentioned as involving none other than Ed and Lorraine Warren (see **FT381:26**).

Perhaps this was where they got their idea of ghostly nuns, which featured in one (or more) of the ludicrous films supposedly inspired by their adventures.

Aside from her Borley experience, my mother was convinced she once heard unexplained sounds in our home. Initially, she thought Dad had returned from work, but in fact he did not arrive for some time. It did not seem to represent or herald anything negative and would have been hailed in Scandinavian tradition as an example of the *vardogter* or *doppelganger*, prophesying the arrival of a person by mimicking the sounds they will make, a form of second sight (see **FT101:51, 104:52, 327:30-33, 432:66**).

By this time, my grandmother Elsie Murdie talked more openly about her psychic interests. In her youth, prior to marriage, and to escape the drudgery of shop work in a family greengrocery business, she had developed a taste for astrology, clairvoyance, the mysteries of ancient Egypt and popular science fiction. However, on marriage to my grandfather she was discouraged from exploring these interests further as he considered them foolish.

Despite her secret passions, my grandmother disappointingly confided she had never encountered the uncanny personally, beyond undergoing a classic out-of-the-body experience as a young woman. This occurred when she underwent a general anaesthetic at the dentist. She awoke to find herself floating near the ceiling, looking down on her physical body asleep in the dentist's chair. She said this moment of disembodiment





Midnight arrival of man in black upsets ghost-hunters' vigil at Borley Church

By KEN HERRON and MAX STOCKER

TWO ghost-seekers from America were sitting silently in the dark in Borley Church, near Sudbury, when a dark-clad figure walked in at midnight.

But the visitor was not an apparition. He was punk rock star Dave Vanian, 21, an ex-member of The Damned, accompanied by his wife, Linda, and a friend, John Milner.

When the visitors tried to leave, Sudbury police were called in.

The ghost-hunters, Mr Paul Dantz and Miss Garry Leary, are members of the Connecticut-based Psychotronics for Clinical Psychotronics.

Yesterday, Psychotronics leader Mr. Ed Warren said he had never been more involved in some sort of magic.

Mr. Milner said from Surrey where he is the record producer, "We have come to see what Borley is like. We are not interested in seeing any ghosts."

"I saw a proposition on Borley Church on the BBC and we thought it would be interesting to go."

They had arrived late on Thurs-

day evening and the hotel was "very frightening" when the trio walked up the stairs, each carrying a case. They had sat down in a pew and stared silently at the floor.

Mr. Barts, "I asked them what they were but they didn't answer."

"We wanted to see what they would do but they just sat there. I went to the back of the church and turned on the lights."

He said all three refused to answer his questions and so he left with Miss Leary to tell the police.

The police persuaded the three to leave but made no charges.

Mr. Barts, "I am not surprised that there are still ghostly phenomena at Borley Church."

Mr. Warren and wife, Linda, said they had been to the church many times before and on each occasion had encountered strange happenings such as "psychokinetic" effects.

In 1975 the group saw a ghostly nun near the altar and



took away her fear of death.

As for my father, he once spoke of hearing unexplained footsteps at the old fire station (now demolished) along Fornham Road in Bury St Edmunds one evening. This stood not far from the mediaeval ruin of St Saviour's Hospital, one of several haunted properties nearby supposedly troubled by a Grey Lady, and to pools known as the Mermaid or Merry Maid Pits, hinting at older supernatural legends.

Beyond this, the only family member who ever definitely admitted seeing any ghost was my uncle Ken Williams, the husband of my mum's cousin Mary. He recalled seeing the ghost of a woman one morning in 1949, in the kitchen of their first house at Bishops Stortford. This was about four months after moving in. The apparition was the previous owner who had gassed herself, either by accident or design. For many years it was the only Bishops Stortford ghost story I knew, until asked to contribute a foreword for Jenni Kemp's excellent book *Haunted Bishops Stortford* (2015), which exposes a wealth of spectres around the town (see FT337:18-20). Ken was wholly matter-of-fact about his sighting, dryly observing the ghost had probably reduced the purchase price for Mary and himself.

There was also my Uncle Eric Browning, who once mentioned possibly seeing an apparition in Huntingdonshire during the early 1970s. Uncle Eric, an accountant with an engineering firm, was on a business trip and staying overnight at a hotel (un-named). He awoke to see a distraught looking young man in a motorcycle kit standing in

In February 1978, punk musician Dave Vanian disrupted an overnight vigil by a party of American ghost hunters



his bedroom. The figure appeared to be speaking soundlessly before vanishing. He learned from hotel staff their opinion that

ABOVE: The East Anglian Daily Times reports on Dave Vanian's disruption of a ghost hunting vigil in Borley Church. LEFT: The offending punk rocker and his wife getting hitched in 1977

this was the wraith of a youth killed locally in an accident. But it could have been a dream - seeing is not always believing.

Beyond briefly sharing these accounts my family remained largely uninterested and disinclined to talk about or contemplate their experiences further, even when my burgeoning interests became apparent. Thus, in terms of direct testimony these accounts remain fragmentary, even though I realise just how complicated such experiences actually are, in terms of their wider context, meaning and implications. As the Victorian psychical researcher Frederic Myers stated, apparitions are one of the most complex phenomena in nature, a fact not fully apprehended by many who witness them.

So my family stories rate only as rather minor ghostly anecdotes, one-off incidents in the course of lives devoted to other concerns. Had I not noted them they would have been entirely forgotten and lost.

Yet, as CS Lewis remarked in his book *The Discarded Image* (1964), their significance lies in their seeming insignificance. One of the best guarantees of their authenticity is their sheer triviality and lack of interest for the people undergoing them, potential signs or signals coming from another dimension, innocently and dispassionately received by people with their minds on other matters.



KARL SHUKER on how contraband scales revealed a new species, plus a mermaid mystery

P-P-PICK UP A NEW PANGOLIN!

Known alternatively as scaly anteaters for obvious physical reasons, these animated pine cones are among the world's most distinctive – but also, tragically – most endangered mammals, due to over-hunting by poachers for their meat as well as for their scales, the latter being illegally used in traditional medicine within their African and Asian distribution. Consequently, it is both surprising and pleasing that a totally new and relatively large – yet hitherto entirely-unsuspected – cryptic pangolin species has recently been scientifically revealed and duly added to the list of eight previously recognised ones.

Its story began in 2012, when some pangolin scales were confiscated in Hong Kong, but didn't seem to match the scales of any species then known to science. Some more of these strange scales turned up the following year via a further confiscation, again in Hong Kong, followed by further finds in 2015 and 2019 in Yunnan, mainland China, these four confiscations collectively yielding 33 scales from the puzzling pangolin. A team of researchers including Hua-Rong Zhang, a conservation geneticist at Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden in Hong Kong, then conducted a series of genomic analyses upon genetic samples extracted from them and compared the results with genomic analyses of scales from all eight of the then-known pangolin species, as well as conducting morphological comparisons based upon scale size, shape, and structure.

The team's findings established that the contraband scales had derived from seven different individuals, and that their species belonged to the Asian pangolin genus *Manis*, rather than to either of the African pangolin genera, *Phataginus* and *Smutsia* – but that was not all. They also revealed that it was sufficiently different genetically from all four of the Asian pangolins known to science, having diverged from all them in evolutionary terms more than five million years ago, to warrant being categorised as a wholly separate species in its own right. So in September 2023 it was formally documented as such, and aptly christened *Manis mysteria* – the mystery pangolin. Moreover, this secret species is an excellent example of hiding in plain sight, because although it is now known to exist thanks to those confiscated scale samples, it has yet to be identified in the field. So, somewhere out there, hidden within the vast wilds of Asia, lives a novel, highly elusive pangolin species

DRESSY VAN

PERG VANG



TOP LEFT: A Philippine pangolin (*Manis culionensis*) with a pup hitching a lift. ABOVE LEFT: Some of the pangolin scales that led to the discovery of *Manis mysteria*. ABOVE RIGHT: The Clark County Fiji Mermaid

– but where? Its fascinating story continues...

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/25/science/pangolins-new-species-scales.html>; <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.230409612025>

FRANKENSTEIN'S MERMAID

Dating back to the 1870s or thereabouts, a most unusual gift was donated in 1906 to the Clark County Historical Society in Springfield, Ohio, by a sailor who'd originally purchased it in Japan. It was a mermaid – or, to be precise, a mummy-like version of one, which had been created in classic Frankensteinian fashion by the deft joining together of body parts from more than one original specimen – and species. For external observations indicate that this fake but very distinctive-looking entity, with hideous grimacing visage, wispy grey hair, and needle-sharp, over-sized claws, combines the head and torso of a monkey with the paws of some kind of reptile, possibly a lizard or a small alligator or crocodile, and the rayed tail of an as yet still-unidentified species of fish. When constructed to resemble mer-folk, such human-manufactured hoaxes (or gaffs, to give them their correct term) are referred to specifically as Fiji (or Feejee) Mermaids, after the famous specimen exhibited by American master showman Phineas T Barnum back in the 19th century (see **FT254:35, 46-49**)

However, although the much-viewed Ohio specimen's outward appearance

is well documented, nothing whatsoever is known about its internal construction, but all that is about to change. More than a century after it arrived in Springfield, this multi-membered mermaid has been subjected to a series of X-rays and CT scans, the data obtained from which is currently being studied intently by Northern Kentucky University radiologist Dr Joseph Cress, who hopes to learn more about how faithful, or otherwise, its interior is to a genuine creature. How deep internally do its external nostrils travel, for instance – do they connect internally to a nasal cavity, or are they just anatomical cul-de-sacs? Do the two ear cavities link up internally to a preserved brain (presumably the monkey's if it is indeed retained inside the head)? And all manner of unanswered questions exist in relation to what may be preserved inside its body, but modern-day diagnostics should finally be able to resolve at least some of these. The full results will be sent to experts at Cincinnati Zoo and the Newport Aquarium for formal analysis and, hopefully, conclusive identification of the various component species seemingly involved in this composite beast's creation. We await the verdict with interest

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article/12665229/Unravelling-mystery-Fiji-Mermaid-Scans-confirmed-bizarre-creature-discovered-Japan-fish-monkey-reptile.html>; <https://www.sciencetimes.com/articles/46727/20231025/fiji-mermaid-mummy-scan-confirms-bizarre-creature-japan-part-fish.htm>

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FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

More drone weirdness, cursed painting finds new home and Somerset gimp's wriggling days are over

DRONING ON [FT416:18-19, 424:22, 436:24]

Fortean Times  In Ukraine, Chechen troops fighting for Russia under the command of the notorious warlord Ramzan Kadyrov (who may, or may not, be one of the latest victims of the 'mysterious deaths' afflicting Russia's military leadership, see FT421:8-9, 424:22-23, 428:27) claim to have been attacked by mystery drones. They accuse Ukraine of using giant drones equipped with pincers to swoop down and abduct their wounded, dragging them off into the sky without warning. A member of the Chechen Akhmat battalion described the things as "Baba Yaga", named after the witch from Slavic folklore who abducts and eats children, saying, "The drone is equipped with special devices that look like claws, with which it captures a person who is not able to run away, hide or fight [the drone] off." He said that the machines hunt at night and are immune to Russian jamming, so can only be destroyed with flamethrowers or grenade launchers. Ukraine does operate large, armoured drones they call "Baba Yaga", but say these are exclusively for dropping bombs on Russian positions, do not have claws, and are not strong enough to lift a person.

Cambodia has also been experiencing a mystery drone incursion. Up to seven at a time have been seen in the sky over Koh Nhix district in Mondulkiri province, on the border with Vietnam, appearing as fuzzy white lights in videos shot by locals. The Cambodian military initially thought they were of Vietnamese origin, but the Vietnamese government has denied any involvement, and while an indigenous resistance group was also suspected of



ABOVE Ukrainian troops posted this photo of a 'Baba Yaga' drone they had shot down **FACING PAGE** RIP Bob!

operating the drones, this too has been discounted. It has also proved difficult to shoot the mysterious craft down, so Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen has ordered a detachment of 500 troops equipped with 200 anti-aircraft weapons to the border to attempt to track the drones' origin and bring them down. "This is to prevent all forms of invasion or espionage while we have not known the origin of these drones yet," he said. "Drones flying into Cambodia's land for spying purposes at night is not an ordinary matter," he added, and has offered a £164,000 bounty for any military unit that shoots down a drone.

In the US, the Department of Energy (DOE) has released documents relating to the activities of unauthorised drones and UAP near its nuclear installations. They confirm the occurrence of previously reported incidents at their sites, and document a series of repeated incursions at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) in California between May 2018 and April 2021. Most of these took place at Site 300, an experimental facility 15 miles

(24km) east of LLNL, primarily used to test high explosives and other materials involved in the development of nuclear weapons. As with previous incursions, DOE security had trouble downing the intruders and was unable to identify who was operating them. Most of the drones were quadcopter-style machines with blue or red and white lights on them, some of which were spotted solely by their lights, although

one at least was seen at close quarters by a member of staff when it hovered 20 to 30ft (6 to 9m) over his car; he could not, though, see any identifying markings. However, on 30 April 2019, a "drone-like object" seen over LLNL was described as a "round silver drone flying around the Process Area and periodically stopping and hovering for several seconds". It eventually moved toward the north, stopped, and hovered again for a short period before disappearing. [dailystar.com](https://www.dailystar.com), 22 Aug; khymertimes.kh.com, 28 Jun; thediplomat.com, 29 Jun; thedebrief.org, 29 Sept 2023.

CURSED PAINTING [FT437:8-9]

Fortean Times  The saga of the "cursed" painting bought in a Hastings charity shop has a new chapter. Initially donated to the shop among a collection of pictures and frames by a man who is yet to be traced, the portrait of a young girl was soon sold to a buyer who returned it almost immediately due to its unsettling influence, only for it to be purchased by Zoe Elliott-Brown, 36. She also returned it after it allegedly unleashed a torrent of paranormal activity in her home, although

she retrieved it once it had received national attention. Unsurprisingly Elliott-Brown has now flipped the painting. Having bought it for £25, she has sold it on to The London Bridge Experience for £1,600 (donating half the profit to the charity shop). Claiming to be "the UK's scariest attraction" the Experience has added it to their exhibition, which combines history and horror. Managing Director James Kislingbury claims that the picture has brought its paranormal aura with it. He says things started to get "weird" when he went to collect the picture from Hastings. "My car broke down on the way back," he claims, "and since it's been here at London Bridge, staff have been complaining of hearing weird noises and being chased." Shannon Fagan, who has worked at the attraction for nine years, says that she has "definitely noticed" the curse, adding that "the other day I was here on my own and I saw a black swoosh figure go through the door in front of me."

Kislingbury also attributes an accident in which he broke his collarbone, a wi-fi outage and a washing machine breakdown to the picture's malign influence. He doesn't, however, plan to get rid of the painting, saying, "We're definitely going to keep it where it is – it's got a new home with us", and is appealing for any information about the picture's artist and history. Meanwhile, the painting became the centrepiece of one of their special Hallowe'en events. southwarknews.co.uk, 12 Oct 2023.

SURFBOARD STEALING SEA OTTER [FT436:9]

Otter 841, the sea otter who achieved international fame earlier this year after a persistent campaign of surfboard theft off Santa

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

274: CHRISTMAS TREES



The myth

Prince Albert introduced the Christmas tree to Britain.

The "truth"

Of all the stories told about Albie, this is probably the second best known and the most believed. The combination of lights and evergreen foliage has been part of Christmas and other midwinter festivals across Europe as far back as history goes, and there are British traditions from the Middle Ages onwards which look like precursors of the 18th century tree. But the first written mention of a fir being taken into a living room and decorated for Christmas – in other words, something we would recognise as a modern Christmas tree – appears in Strasbourg in 1605. By the 1770s the tree had become central to Christmas in Germany, and widespread knowledge of it probably arrived in this country via Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in the 1780s. The Germanic connections of British royal families meant that the custom was familiar to the smart set who had access to court, and records of such people erecting or discussing Christmas trees are known from 1789, and then quite frequently throughout the 1820s and 1830s. By the 1840s the tree was common in certain areas of Britain (notably Manchester, with its large German population) and was beginning to escape from its foreign origins to become adopted as a native custom. In 1848 the *Illustrated London News* published an engraving of Victoria and Albert standing next to a Christmas tree, one of many in Windsor Castle. That started a craze of imitation in the UK, but more especially in the US. In Britain, indoor Christmas trees did not become universal until after WWI – so if anything, it could be said we imported our modern custom from the Americans.

Sources

Christmas: A History by Judith Flanders (Picador, 2018); *The Englishman's Christmas* by JAR Pimlott (Harvester Press, 1978).

Disclaimer

It has twisted branches and knotted roots, the Christmas tree tale, please use the letters page to illuminate any faulty baubles.

Cruz, California, has evaded all attempts to capture her and return her to Monterey Aquarium where she was born. Instead, she has given birth to a pup, having been spotted in late October floating in the sea kelp beds off Santa Cruz with a baby otter on her belly. Mark Woodward, who runs social media accounts dedicated to 841, said: "I couldn't believe it – I think I let out a yelp when I saw it." This may help explain her unusual behaviour towards surfers; sea otter pregnancies last about six months and the resulting hormonal changes can cause the animal to become temporarily aggressive. *latimes.com*, 26 Oct 2023.

OLDEST DOG [430:25]

For the record
In February, Bobi, a purebred Rafeiro do Alentejo, scooped not only the title of the world's oldest living dog, but, at 30 years and 266 days, the world's oldest ever dog. Sadly, he has now died, aged 31 years and 165 days. Announcing Bobi's death at home in Portugal, vet Karen Becker said, "Despite outliving every dog in history, his 11,478 days on Earth would never be enough, for those who loved him." Bobi spent his whole life with the Costa family in the village of Conqueiros, after narrowly escaping death as a puppy, when the Costas decided they had too many animals and planned to put the newly arrived puppies down. However, Leonel Costa, who was eight at the time, along with his brothers, hid Bobi from his parents, so he survived and was eventually accepted as part of the family. The dog suffered from worsening eyesight and

had trouble walking towards the end, but the Costas said he had lived a healthy and trouble-free life, putting Bobi's longevity down to a "calm, peaceful environment". As yet, Guinness have not announced as successor to the title of oldest living dog, although his claim to be the oldest dog ever is likely to stand for some time; Bobi's predecessor, Bluey, died in Australia at the age of 29 years and five months in 1939. *BBC News*, 23 Oct 2023.

SOMERSET GIMP [FT384:24, 428:26, 433:9, 435:25]

For the record
Joshua Hunt, 32, a self-employed gardener, was found guilty at Bristol magistrates' court of two offences under the Public Order Act of causing intentional harassment, alarm or distress relating to a series of incidents involving what became known as "the Somerset Gimp". These involved a man, apparently dressed in a rubber "gimp suit" and mask, leaping out on people after dark in several Somerset villages and writhing on the ground, causing consternation and terror. Hunt maintained that he was "not a gimp" but went out in dark clothing to writh in mud because of self-loathing and a mental health crisis. "It never entered my head that what I was doing was frightening people," he said, and apologised for his behaviour. Hunt was fined £100 and ordered to pay £200 to his victim. He had previously spent time in prison for his actions and made subject to a Sexual Risk Order that bans him from wearing a mask or possessing one in a public place and wearing black all-in-one clothing at night in public. He is also forbidden to "crawl, wriggle or writh on the ground wearing a full-body covering or mask" or visit the areas where the offences took place. *Telegraph.co.uk*, 27 Oct 2023.



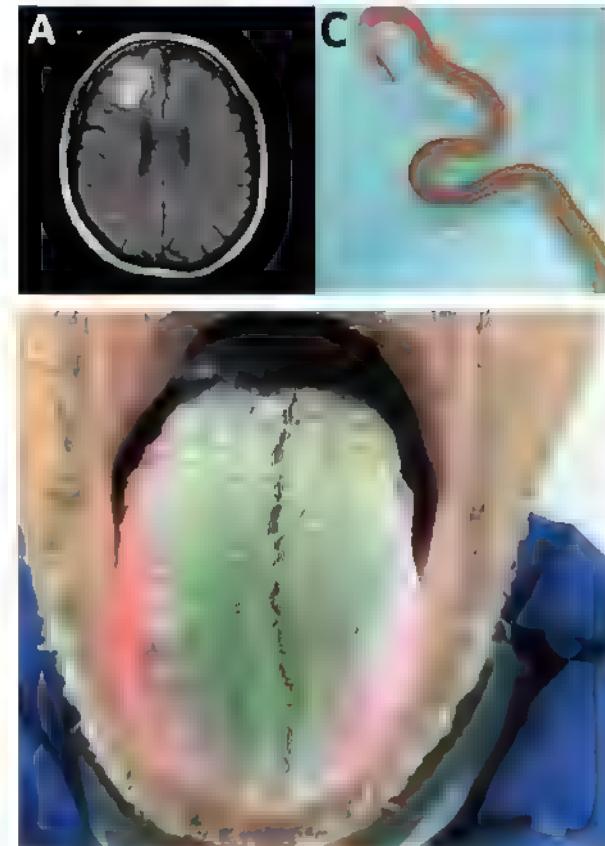


MEDICAL BAG

Our odd outpatients include a woman with a worm in her brain, a man with a furry green tongue and a chap with a flagpole through his skull

SNAKE PARASITES ALIVE!

When a 64-year-old woman from New South Wales, Australia, was first admitted to her local hospital in January 2021 after suffering three weeks of abdominal pain and diarrhoea, followed by a constant dry cough, fever and night sweats, doctors could not pin down the cause, so continued to monitor her. By 2022, her symptoms included depression and forgetfulness, so she was referred to a Canberra hospital for a brain MRI. Her scan revealed brain abnormalities that needed surgery to investigate further. The operation was carried out by neurosurgeon Dr Hari Priya Bandi, who immediately called his colleague Dr Sanjaya Senanayake, an infectious disease specialist and said, "Oh my God, you wouldn't believe what I just found in this lady's brain – and it's alive and wriggling." He had just removed an 8cm (3in) long parasitic roundworm from the patient's head. "No one was expecting to find that," said Senanayake. "We just went for the textbooks, looking up all the different types of roundworm that could cause neurological invasion and disease." They came up with a blank, so sent the worm to Dr Dave Spratt, a retired parasitologist. "He just looked at it and said, 'Oh my goodness, this is *Ophidascaris robertsi*!'" said Senanayake. This is a parasite of carpet pythons and had never been found in a human before. The doctors discovered that the patient often collected wild plants near a lake area where there are carpet pythons, and believe she picked up the parasite from snake faeces on the vegetation she ate. "That poor patient, she was so courageous and wonderful," Senanayake said. "You don't want to be the first patient in the world with a roundworm found in pythons and we really take our hats off to her" [theguardian.com, 28 Aug; csiro.au, 8 Sept 2023](https://theguardian.com/28 Aug; csiro.au, 8 Sept 2023).

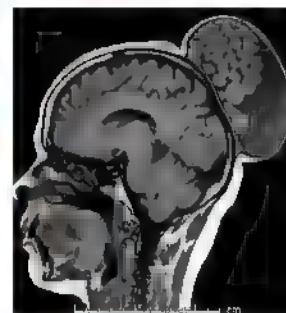


TONGUE TINT TERROR

Confronted by a man whose tongue was covered with a thick, plush mat of green fibres, doctors at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base medical centre assumed the furry coating was a particularly nasty yeast infection and prescribed antifungals. When these failed to make any dent in the patient's lingual lawn, the medics realised the man was, in fact, suffering from hairy tongue syndrome. First recorded in 1557, it is usually found in older men. Hairy tongues are associated with smoking, alcohol use, excessive coffee or black tea consumption, poor oral hygiene, some cancers, and use of certain medications, mainly antibiotics, and involve small protrusions on the surface of the tongue known as papillae.

One type, the filiform papillae, which give the tongue its rough texture, are normally about 1mm (0.04in) long and stay that length by sloughing off old cells from the top as they grow. However, in hairy tongue syndrome, for some reason, the old cells do not slough off and instead build up to form long hair-like structures; the exact trigger is not known. The hairs then trap bacteria and food debris, which gives the growths their colour, as well as green hairs, black, red, yellow, brown, and blue ones have also been recorded. While weird and unpleasant, hairy tongues are not harmful and the patient, who had been on antibiotics before the incident, recovered after being advised to brush his tongue four times a day arstechnica.com, 7 Jul 2023.

LEFT: The 8cm roundworm removed from an Australian patient's brain
BELOW LEFT: Hairy tongue syndrome
BELOW: A scan showing marble-like growths on a patient's head



LOSING HER MARBLES

Writing in the journal *Radiology*, doctors at the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Medical Sciences in Bangalore, India, detailed the case of a 53-year-old woman who sought help for a growth on the back of her head that she said had been developing since she was a child. By the time she arrived at the hospital, the lump was nearly six inches (15cm) long, four inches (10cm) wide and almost five inches (13cm) tall, although she said it was "painless". Removing the growth, doctors found it to be filled with fluid, fatty lumps with "thick outer rims" and marble-like balls of keratin, the material that makes up hair and nails. It was a kind of dermoid cyst, a structure that develops from embryonic cells, often on the head or neck, and which can contain hair, teeth or nerves. Medics removed the mass, and found that it hadn't grown back after monitoring the patient for six months. nypost.com, 26 Jul 2023.

STRAY BACTERIA

Eight hours after being severely bitten by a stray cat that he'd stopped to pet in the street, a 48-year-old British man found that his hands had become so badly swollen that he took him-



self to hospital. There, doctors dressed his wounds, gave him a tetanus jab and sent him home with a course of antibiotics. The next day, though, he returned with two fingers on his left hand painfully engorged and both forearms massively swollen. Doctors removed the damaged tissue around his wounds, gave him three kinds of antibiotics intravenously and sent him home again, after which he made a full recovery.

To work out what had caused the swelling, medics analysed the excised tissue samples and discovered an unrecognisable *Streptococcus*-like bacterium. *Streptococcus* bacteria are linked to meningitis, sore throats, conjunctivitis and bacterial pneumonia, but when they sequenced this bacterium's genome it was completely different from any on record. Further analysis revealed it to belong to the *Globicatella* genus, but having a genome more than 20 per cent different from any known strain, meaning it was a "distinct and previously undescribed species", completely new to science. "This report highlights the role of cats as reservoirs of as yet undiscovered bacterial species that have human pathogenic potential," wrote the case study authors in *Emerging Infectious Diseases*. sciencealert.com, 7 Aug 2023.

FLAG MIRACLE

An altercation at a Sonic fast-food outlet in Tulsa, Oklahoma, ended with Clinton Collins attacking another man with a flagpole. "The pole entered the victim's head beneath his jaw and exited the other side of his head near his right temple area," police said. "The American flag was still attached to the pole at the time." Amazingly, the victim survived the assault, although firefighters had to be called to cut the flagpole so he could fit into an ambulance. After emergency surgery, police reported that the victim is expected to survive his injuries without any brain damage, although he was likely to lose an eye. abcnews.co.com, 3 Aug 2023.



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

CHRISTMAS VS SPIRITS

Is Christmas the most fortean day of the year? Certainly, our ancestors thought it was a thin time, when the line between this and the other world faded away, almost to nothing. A particularly striking example of this are the beliefs around animals (domestic and wild). On Christmas Eve, animals altered their habits radically. In tribute to Christ's birth, bees buzzed in a different way (!), "the bird of dawning singeth all night long", and oxen, horses and cows knelt in their stables. We are told by one south-western author that farmers had to be careful on Christmas Eve with kneeling beasts. If their animals were tied up too tightly, they would throttle themselves, so great was the compulsion to get on their knees! Nor was it enough to mark 24

December, because the animals carried out their obeisances on 24 December *by the old calendar* (the Julian not the Gregorian), which had been done away with in England and Wales in 1752. I find it incredible, but as late as the 1830s, 80 years after the change, we have references to rustics keeping the 'proper' Christmas!

Spirits, meanwhile, absented themselves at Christmas: there was effectively a truce in their war on the human nervous system. According to one text from the 1880s: "The agricultural bogie in Northamptonshire will

hold no dispute with the crafty farmer, nor on the borders of the Tamar and the Tavy will the huntsman hunt on headless horse, and the hunted hare assume the form of witch..." I thought, when I first encountered this, that here we had a pleasing but synthetic romantic Victorian notion for Boxing Day, whipped up with fairy wings and Pepper's

Ghost. But actually the idea can be attested as far back as Shakespeare: "And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad; / The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike, / No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm." It is unclear here, note, whether we are dealing with just Christmas or all Advent: Shakespeare refers to the 'season' and there is the plural 'nights'. But late December was, we can be sure, to spirits what bleach is to germs. Perhaps this is why

Europeans were so keen to tell ghost stories at Christmas: they felt safe!

I also have one Cornish reference that gives a lovely twist to the embargo on the non-Christian supernatural. The pixies, as is well known, determine children's dreams. But on Christmas Eve they fail. In one of Enys Tregarthen's most effective tales: "Somebody far greater than we little Piskeys is ordering [the child's] dreams... which are much more beautiful than we can order."

Simon Young is the editor of *The Wollaton Gnomes: A Nottingham Fairy Mystery* (Pwca 2023)

'NOR WILL THE
HUNTSM' HUNT
ON HEADLESS
HORS AND THE
HUNTED HARE
ASSUME THE
FORM OF A WITCH

Christmas miracles

Santa's on his way, possibly in a flying saucer, but has NIGEL WATSON been naughty or nice?

SPEEDY SANTA

Christmas is a time of wonder, when Christian children are told to believe Santa Claus rides on his reindeer-drawn sleigh from the North Pole on Christmas Eve to distribute gifts to homes throughout the world. The logistics of such an operation, plus his preferred method of delivering the presents down your home's chimney, are pretty implausible.

In 2018, three University of Leicester students calculated that to visit 238 million Christian households, Santa would have a window of 24 hours if he travelled from east to west at 0.5% of the speed of light. Considering that speed is 3,353,083.15 miles per hour or 5,398,264.248954 km/h, a team of reindeer would be pretty well worn out in the first nanoseconds of travel.

A similar study was conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1990, where they worked out that Santa only had to travel 2,340,000.0000753 miles per hour or 3,765,884.9601211837 km/h to deliver to 91.8 million homes.

LOADS OF SANTA

The MIT study goes on to note:

"The payload on the sleigh adds another interesting element. Assuming that each child gets nothing more than a medium-sized Lego set (2.6), the sleigh is carrying 321,300 tons, not counting Santa, who is invariably described as overweight. On land, conventional reindeer can pull no more than 300lb. Even granting that 'flying reindeer' could pull TEN TIMES the normal amount, we cannot do the job with eight, or even nine. We need 214,200 reindeer. This increases the payload – not even counting the weight of the sleigh – to 353,430 tons. Again, for comparison – this is four times the weight of the *Queen Elizabeth* (cruise ship)."

It also points out that the reindeer travelling at such speeds would be vaporised in 4.26 thousandths of a second and create a tremendous trail of sonic booms. However, it does acknowledge that: "these calculations neglect to include the effects of fairy dust and the magical powers of reindeer and the finite chance that miracles do occur!"

QUANTUM SANTA

Dr George Knie, a theoretical physicist at the University of Warwick, in 2017 did provide a possible solution as to how Santa could visit us via the chimney: "... according to quantum physics, the atoms in Santa's body have an uncertain position – a sort of fuzziness that



can slosh around like a liquid. Although it sounds absurd, it is perfectly possible for the uncertainty of Santa's body to flow directly through otherwise difficult gaps. This means that, in theory, Quantum Santa could simply pop out into the fireplace. This also answers the modern day problem of how Father Christmas reaches you if you don't have a chimney – he simply uses quantum tunnelling to slide under the door, or through the cat flap."

How Santa can travel at exceptionally high speed is not explained by Dr Knie, but he does think that he would need something like a quantum computer to conduct his intensive route-planning and maintain a database of naughty and nice children.

DON'T LOOK

Dr Daniel Tapia of the European Council for Nuclear Research (CERN) laboratories in Geneva, also regards Santa as some form of quantum phenomenon. On Christmas Eve he becomes a collection of Santas spread throughout the world. Dr Tapia warned that if any child glimpsed him, "You would know his exact position, which would cause the quantum state to collapse and no more presents could be distributed."

TRACKING SANTA

Quantum or not, the North American Defense Command (NORAD) keeps track of Santa's movements from 1 December on their website (www.noradsanta.org/en/). They note that Santa can manipulate the space-time continuum, so that 24 hours to us can be weeks or months to him, enabling him to make deliveries to every household quite easily.

ESTIMATING THE SITUATION

The studies mentioned above are a bit of festive fun for us nerds and geeks who try to use science to explain the magic of Christmas. Nonetheless, similar 'scientific' ideas have been applied to the study of UFOs and UAPs. An AI Chat GPT was asked about UAPs, and putting it in simple terms it explained that they are special spaceships that operate in a magical bubble enabling them to abruptly change direction and travel at extremely high speed without killing their operators. They are like time machines and might well cause humans harm or change our DNA if we get close to them. They are physical craft that might well have the ability to manipulate our minds. Even AI admits they are a fascinating puzzle.

Such an analysis is no doubt based on claims like those in 'Estimating Flight Characteristics of Anomalous Unidentified Aerial Vehicles' by Kevin Knuth, who notes:

"Estimated accelerations range from almost 100g to 1000s of g with no observed air disturbance, no sonic booms, and no evidence of excessive heat commensurate with even the minimal estimated energies. In accordance with observations, the estimated parameters describing the behaviour of these craft are both anomalous and surprising. The extreme estimated flight characteristics reveal that these observations are either fabricated or seriously in error, or that these craft exhibit technology far more advanced than any known craft on Earth."

The key takeaway there is the use of the term 'estimated.' Basing the possible interstellar abilities of UAPs on such assumptions is akin to working out the characteristics of Santa's sleigh, or estimating the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin.

www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7514271/

ALIEN SANTA

UFO investigator Russ Kellett claims that stories of Santa flying in his sleigh "could very well be a warped version of what people have imagined all these years and could in fact have come from someone spotting an alien ship in the sky on Christmas Eve."

"It's more logical that he's an alien than anything else, but everyone would much prefer to believe in the fairy-tale version of flying reindeer and a sleigh."

And, that's the magic of Christmas: we can choose our own miracles.

www.dailystar.co.uk/news/weird-news/

Worlds without end

JENNY RANDLE goes in search of possible planetary homes for potential alien visitors to Earth

There have been some amazing discoveries recently in the quest to find habitable worlds around distant stars – something that if UFOs are ever to be proven to be extraterrestrial would first have to be established. In fact, if there were not many such worlds, habitable and reachable from our own Solar System, then the likelihood of alien landings or UFO abductions would be remote and reports of them hard to credit.

As little as 50 years ago, when I took astronomy classes at Manchester University, we surmised that many stars in the billions we know to exist would probably host a system of planets, just like our Sun, but we had little more than guesswork to go on, as our nearest star is so far away that there was no way of visually observing it. This 'neighbour', Proxima Centauri, is 4.25 light years, or 5.9 trillion miles, away. Our Sun is eight light minutes from Earth and it takes our modern spacecraft six or seven months to fly there. It would take them over a quarter of a million years to reach that nearest star, let alone any others more likely to have habitable planets.

So if someone is coming here in what we call a UFO, they are travelling vast distances, which requires other conditions to be fulfilled, such as the discovery of near light speed propulsion; or beings that have a lifespan thousands of times greater than ours; or discoveries about the cosmos that we do not yet understand, perhaps allowing for short cuts through space. You can see the problem with the presumption that UFOs are alien visitors. Such a trip is not equivalent to us sending helicopters to fly in the thin Martian atmosphere, as we have recently achieved: it is extraordinarily improbable. The Universe is unimaginably vast, and it is almost certain visitors would have to come from much farther away than Proxima Centauri.

However, as a first requirement we must establish that there are other planets in sufficient numbers with the conditions needed to kick-start life. Indeed, we would have to specify planets with conditions where life could evolve similarly to that on Earth, because if the UFO evidence is descriptive of real aliens, then they are almost all humanoid entities. Utterly alien occupants of UFOs are rare.

So if UFOs are to even credibly be linked to extraterrestrial life, we need to understand why these visitors are nearly all humanoid with a few sci-fi trappings added (think Vulcan ears; it was only when specia-



The fact that we can now put telescopes in space has upped our game

effects technology improved that sci-fi films created species that are not obviously humanoid). This 'humans only' rule is an egotistical fiction ignoring our top-dog status on Earth (and forgets that here mammals evolved from shrew-like creatures able to escape the asteroid impact that almost wiped out the dominant dinosaur predators and step into the ecological gap). Had that not happened, who knows what life on Earth would be like today?

So while the idea that life 'out there' must resemble us – alien visitors as versions of ourselves – is understandable, it is unlikely to be the case. Unless, of course, humanoids seek out other humanoids and invest more in seeking beings they think they can understand rather than trying to communicate with a planet full of intelligent T-rexes. But, this takes us back to the question of whether there are habitable worlds and what these might be like. Over the past 50 years of remarkable scientific discovery, what have we managed to observe?

The first thing is that planets are indeed very common. Trappist 1 has seven Earth-sized planets around a small sun 10 times further away than Proxima Centauri. We may be talking billions of planets given the enormous number of stars in the observable Universe (probably a fraction of the actual number). In terms of variety, their environments show that those the *USS Enterprise* visited in fiction were only the tip of the sci-fi iceberg.

But 50 years of amazing developments in space exploration and technology has allowed us to do things unimaginable when I took those astronomy classes with Zdenek Kopal, one of the pioneers in the search for

LEFT Artist's impression of the planet Proxima b orbiting Proxima Centauri

exoplanets, as we now call planets circling other stars beyond our Solar System. He was a pioneer. Now we know they exist.

The fact that we can now put telescopes in space, far from the restrictions caused by our thick atmosphere, has upped our game by several orders of magnitude, although these are as yet not able to take the kind of images we are used to seeing of the other planets orbiting our Sun. We cannot send a craft to an extra solar planet to take images. Voyager, launched half a century ago, is barely beyond the outer edge of our Solar System and 15,000 years from leaving it; it would take it 75,000 years to reach Proxima Centauri – not much use to present day planet-hunting scientists.

You might reasonably ask why Voyager is not heading to our nearest neighbour star. There are many reasons, but not least is that it is a Red Dwarf, much smaller than our Sun and so its 'habitable' zone (which in our Solar System effectively means Venus, Earth and Mars) is reduced to an area very near the star. Planets found around Proxima take just a few days to complete an orbit and are all but impossible to see from Earth. We use other methods, such as the slight dimming of light when a large planet passes the line of sight of the star. That occultation method was one of the first used to detect large planets crossing in front of other stars, but many newer methods are used, including doppler – much like detecting the speed of a passing car by the way sound changes as an object approaches and then moves away. Light waves do this, and mean we can detect orbiting planets circling distant stars we cannot see. This has allowed us to discover that there are two planets orbiting Proxima Centauri, both just about within its small habitable zone. One, found only in 2021, has an 11 day 'year'.

There are more promising abodes for life in the ever-expanding catalogue of over 5,500 extra solar planets (as of September 2023) to add to the nine around our own Sun, but it's fun to imagine what any aliens born on the two Proxima planets, with such rapidly changing years and proximity to a relatively dim star, would be like. If they visited Earth, would it really be to pester a farmer's cows? And if so, how would they be able to go about their business on such a different planet circling our (to them) 'burning' Sun?

THE HYTHE MOTHMAN MONSTER, GHOST OR UFO?

In November 1963 the quiet lanes around the Kent town of Hythe were stalked by a bat-winged, headless horror... or was it the ghost of a local landowner? NEIL ARNOLD returns to the case that taught his younger self that monsters can sometimes lurk close to home.



DAVID SUTTON

Every time the autumn comes around, a chill runs down my spine as childhood memories are conjured like swirling wisps from a witch's cauldron stirred on All Hallows Eve. The bonfire-scented month of November crackles with a soundtrack of crisp, trodden leaves and takes me back to a horror that has stuck with me for decades. And it's a horror quite well known and often regurgitated within fortean circles.

It started for me as a kid. I was born in 1974 in Kent – a county steeped in folklore. During the early to mid 1980s I was already immersing myself in a subject that, unbeknownst to me back then, was known as cryptozoology. My introduction was the 1974 Carey Miller book *A Dictionary Of Monsters*, given to me by my grandfather. As an excited eight-year old I lapped up the bizarre entries and images of mythical beasts such as harpies, basilisks and

MY GRANDFATHER PLANTED THE IDEA THAT SUCH THINGS COULD EXIST

vampires. The abominable snowman, Bigfoot and Loch Ness Monster leered from the pages as black and white illustrations. When my grandfather planted in my young mind the possibility that such things could exist, I was both terrified and amazed.

My obsession had begun and was bolstered further when my grandfather's brother handed me a video cassette of a movie called

ABOVE: Mothman country: the fields and lanes between Sandling and Saltwood

The Legend Of Boggy Creek, which at the time I took to be a real-life documentary about a small town in Arkansas named Fouke, which for many years had been haunted by a lumbering, hair-covered bipedal creature (see FT223:44-49). The movie was made in 1972 and directed by Charles B Pierce. Today, many monster hunters cite this eerie film as being a major influence on their lives. However, for me, all of these monsters seemed a world away; possible manifestations confined to dense, unreachable forests and inhospitable plateaux in distant countries.

A KENTISH HORROR

And then the horror came closer to home. My mother's uncle introduced me to the world

STRANGE CREATURES FROM TIME & SPACE

JOHN KEE



ABOVE LEFT: John Keel's book *Strange Creatures from Time and Space* was an early influence on the author – and alerted him to the existence of a Kentish mothman. ABOVE RIGHT: A map showing the location of Slaybrook Corner on Sandling Road. BELOW: Just a few of the skulls in the ossuary of St Leonard's Church, Hythe.



of John Keel through a book called *Strange Creatures From Time & Space* published in 1975, within which lurked a chapter entitled 'The Man-Birds'. It outlined a case that had allegedly taken place in my own county of Kent, in Hythe, a coastal market town situated on the edge of Romney Marsh. According to Keel: "Four young people were walking home from a dance along a quiet country road near Sandling Park, Hythe, Kent, on the evening of November 16th 1963. John Flaxton, 17, was the first to notice an unusually bright star moving directly overhead. They watched with growing alarm as it descended and glided closer and closer to them. It seemed to hover and then dropped out of sight behind some nearby trees."

Flaxton recalled how he went cold all over and that he and his friends started to run in panic. However, they noticed that the light had reappeared, only this time much closer and only about 10 feet (3m) above the ground at a distance of approximately 200 feet (60m) from them. One of the group described the object as "bright gold and oval" and said that every time they moved, the object also seemed to do so. The light disappeared behind some trees, but it was the snapping sound of twigs that signalled the appearance of the true horror. According to the teenagers, a black figure emerged from the trees and shuffled towards them. "It was the size of a human," reported Mervyn Hutchinson. "It didn't seem to have any head... there were huge wings on its back... like bat wings," he added. The teenagers fled and when interviewed by police it was claimed that all their stories matched.

Keel, who later relayed further information from *Flying Saucer Magazine* editor Charles

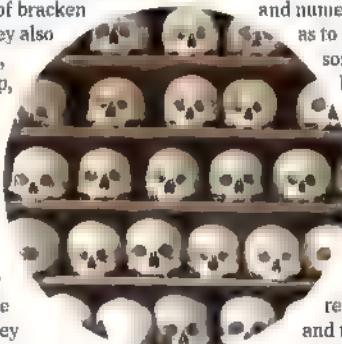
Bowen, added: "On November 21, 1963, Keith Croucher, aged 17, reported seeing a solid oval light in the centre of a golden mist crossing a football pitch near Sandling Estate. On the night of November 23/24, John McGoldrick and friend went to Sandling Woods to investigate the previously reported sightings. They found 'a vast expanse of bracken that had been flattened', they also found three giant footprints, clearly defined, an inch deep, two feet (60cm) long, and nine inches (23cm) across. On December 11, McGoldrick and his friend went back to the site with two newspaper reporters, and found the woods illuminated by a pulsating light. They watched the light from a safe distance for half an hour: they were too scared to go closer."

And there the mystery of what would become known, decades later, as the 'Hythe Mothman' seemed to end. The Keel text has since been regurgitated many times in books and articles, passed round in classic urban legend fashion like a ghoulish campfire whisper, and occasionally distorted over time by each storyteller.

HAUNTED HYTHE

But even as a child, I was inquisitive, eager to find out truths behind such stories and I recall several visits with family members to the Sandling Estate and Hythe in general in search of local ghost stories. I was enthralled by St Leonard's Church and its ossuary containing 1,000 human skulls and various bones (some of which were stolen in 2018,

FT373:12). The earliest reference made to the macabre collection dates back to 1678 to the writings of Rye town clerk Samuel Jeake and a year later by Reverend Brone, Chaplain to the Cinque Ports, who recorded "orderly piles of dead man's bones". The first drawings made of the skulls emerged in 1787 and numerous theories have surfaced as to the origins of the collection, some claiming that the bones belonged to victims of the Black Death, while others propose they were the result of historic battles such as one in 1787 in which many Danish pirates were killed, or even to the 1066 battle of Hastings. It's likely that there is a more prosaic reason for the skulls' presence and that they were merely residents of Hythe whose remains were disturbed as far back as the 13th century when the churchyard was extended.



My investigations also drew me to Saltwood Castle, constructed in the 11th century, and nearby Sandling Station and Slaybrook Hall, the setting for Noel Coward's classic play *Blithe Spirit*. Both the station and hall are rumoured to be haunted, the former by anomalous lights, the latter by the knights who hid in the building after murdering Thomas Becket. I also heard of numerous other ghostly tales, including two female apparitions, both accompanied by pet dogs, one of whom was said to appear close to Brockhill School, the other on an unnamed section of road where she steps out in front of vehicles only to vanish. Hythe was, and still is, full of ghostly rumours, but it was the 'winged



ABOVE LEFT: Sandling Station - the scene of anomalous lights, as it looked at the time of the 'Hythe Horror', with the now closed branch line clearly visible.
ABOVE RIGHT: Saltwood Castle - once the home of art historian and writer Kenneth Clark - was reputedly haunted by the knights who murdered St Thomas Becket.

horror' that I gravitated to, and with each anniversary I prowled the country lanes and dark woods like a naive detective, inwardly praying that the local 'Mothman' would not make an appearance. Even so, as the years rolled by I'd become aware of a far more famous winged humanoid, the real 'Mothman' if you will, which haunted Point Pleasant, West Virginia, three years after the Hythe incident. Judging by Keel's writings, the world was full of seemingly similar humanoids, all existing to terrify residents of towns with the beating of their black wings.

It wasn't easy investigating cases like the Hythe incident in those days; there was no Internet, newspaper archives were difficult to access, and potential witnesses, or their friends and family, were difficult to track down. Nowadays, newspaper archives allow us to trace long forgotten stories, and while searching such archives can be time-consuming, the rewards can be great. And it was a newspaper cutting that shone a new light on the Hythe horror.

BLACK MAGIC

Strangely, it was just after one of the 1990s anniversaries of the Hythe 'man-bird' incident that I stumbled upon a rather interesting collection of newspaper reports. The most dramatic headline emerged from 25 November 1963. "Rector Hunts Ghost Of Love Lane - Black Magic circle blamed," screamed the *Daily Mirror*. "A ghost is said to be haunting courting couples in a village lane," the report stated. "And the local rector is following up rumours that a Black Magic circle may be responsible for the 'terror'."

Admittedly, I was already confused by the report as I'd seen no previous mention of the so-called Hythe winged humanoid being a mere ghost rather than a cryptozoological monstrosity. "The ghost is reputed to be of William Tournay Tournay, a rich eccentric

"A BLACK MAGIC CIRCLE MEETS IN A SECRET HIDEOUT IN THE VILLAGE"

landowner who was buried 60 years ago on an island in the middle of a lake at Saltwood, near Hythe, in Kent."

I wondered why the spectre of a deceased local man would appear first as a bright, bobbing light and then as a headless, bat-winged entity. The report continued, "Mervyn Hutchinson, 18, of Bartholomew's Lane, Saltwood, said he saw the ghost two nights ago while walking with his girlfriend to the village station. 'We saw a red flash in front of us like a red ball of fire going down the hill,' said Mervyn. 'Then suddenly this figure appeared. It was rather like a bat. It seemed to have webbed feet but no head. It was a terrifying experience and we just ran'."

The article continued: "John Flaxton, 17, was walking with his girlfriend along the same country lane, known as Slaybrook Corner, when they saw the ghost. Said John. 'We were scared out of our wits. I'm never going up that lane again at night unless I'm in a crowd'."

"The Rector of Saltwood, the Rev. Eric Stanton, said yesterday: 'Several young people in the village have come to see me saying they have seen the ghost. There are rumours that a Black Magic circle meets in a secret hideout in the village and that they are responsible. I have no proof yet that they are working in Saltwood, but I am determined to get to the bottom of this business

because it is disrupting village life.'"

Judging by sensational press reports it would seem that alleged black magic cults and Satanic groups were operating in abundance during the 1960s - the foggy case of the Highgate Vampire in London being a prime example - and we often, despite the lack of evidence, held such dark arts responsible for numerous crimes and strange reports. However, I was more fascinated by the mention of a suspect behind the 'Hythe Mothman' reports, and so I set off in search of the intriguing William Tournay Tournay, thinking at first that maybe no such character existed and that his name had simply been drafted in to add extra spice to the article.

But William Tournay Tournay was real enough: he was born in February 1849 and died on 20 August 1903 at his Brockhill Park estate at Saltwood. He was Justice of Peace for the Elham Division and, according to reports, was a reclusive figure, holed up in his large house with only his two servants - a Mr and Mrs Mowill - and his dog, Daisy, for company. In earlier life he had been an avid big game hunter: a large stuffed polar bear that stood at the window of his property testified to this, as did the various exotic rugs and skins littered about the hall, and his collection of stuffed birds was presented by his relatives, Miss Allen and Miss Kenyon-Stowe, to Hythe Town Hall after his death as a colourful addition to the local museum. Tournay had purchased an island situated in a nearby lake, and it was here that he wished his remains to be interred. The *Evening Express* of 27 August 1903 reported on his "extraordinary funeral". The island remains to this day, but Tournay's headstone is long gone, possibly consumed by the sodden soil around it. Occasional passers-by hesitated to look up at the leering windows of the empty Brockhill Park, fearing the ghost of





AN ISLAND GRAVE.

THE LATE MR. TOURNAEY'S BURIAL.
FUNERAL.

BURIED IN HIS OWN GROUNDS.

It was announced in our last issue Mr. William Tournay, Justice of the Peace for the Etham Division, passed away at his residence, Brookhill Park, Saltwood, on Thursday, 28th August. Twenty years ago the deceased gentleman succeeded his father to the estate, his name then being William Tournay Allen. Since that time the villagers of Saltwood have seen little or nothing of the Justice. He has lived a solitary retired life in the house, his only servants being the caretaker and his wife (Mr. and Mrs. Mawill). To all, however, the fact is known that Mr. Tournay was a capital shot with a revolver or rifle, and possessed much skill as a mechanician. Passers by the "haunted house," as Brookhill is termed by the villagers, can see in one of the front rooms a huge polar bear, which stands about nine feet in height, while rugs, and skins of every description furnish the front portion of the house.

ABOVE: A newspaper notice of William Tournay Tournay's strange funeral. LEFT: The only known photograph of the vanished Tournay graves.

BELOW: Newspaper headlines reveal the changing putative identities of the 'Hythe Horror', from a ghost raised by black magic to a flying saucer

what became known locally as the "haunted house". Others whispered that a curse had been placed upon Tournay; at the time of his burial, a local woman, according to a newspaper report, stated that: "His mother, father and brother all died in August, and I knew he would not live after this month."

In spite of the tenuous links between Tournay and a potential curse, or even a ghost, I could find no reason why the Rev. Stanton or the press articles connected him to the November 1963 accounts. Stanton, who appears never to have solved the mystery, said, "I don't think it proper to reject these stories of a ghost all the while they are disturbing the village. I intend to continue my own personal investigations until a reasonable explanation is found. I haven't seen anything because I am not a psychic person. I think you have to be to experience these things."

According to the *Kentish Express* of 29 November 1963, "Talk of the ghost has reached such a height in the village that parties are being organised to lie in wait. But the women of the village are not so keen on the idea. 'I lock and bar the doors and windows as soon as it begins to get dark,' said a housewife."

GREAT BALLS OF FIRE

Bizarrely, by the middle of December the story had taken another twist. The *Kentish Express* of 13 December ran the headline, "Ghost a flying saucer?", commenting that the "ghost which has been seen by several people at Saltwood recently may not be a ghost after all. Mr C.A. Strickland, of the London Unidentified Flying Objects Research Organisation, says it was probably a flying saucer." The article continued: "Mr Strickland spent last weekend at Saltwood's Castle Hotel investigating the ghost reports. He said the glowing object seen in the sky and reports of balls of light and fire pointed towards a flying saucer having landed in the

Ghost haunts lovers' lane

From OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT

LONDON, Sat. — Couples who go courting in a country lane in Kent say they are being haunted by a ghost.

A local rector is tracking down a reported black magic circle that has been blamed for the "terror."

The ghost is said to be of William Tournay Tournay, a rich, eccentric landowner who was buried 60 years ago on an island in the middle of a lake at Saltwood, near Hythe village, in Kent.

Mervyn Hutchinson, 18, said he saw the ghost one black, chilly evening last week while walking his girlfriend to the village station.

"We saw a red flash in front of us like a red ball of fire going down the hill," he said.

He said: "We were scared out of our wits. I'm never going up that

lane again at night unless I'm in a crowd."

The rector of Saltwood, the Reverend E. Stanton, said: "Several young people in the village have come to see me saying they have seen the ghost.

Scared

Another teenage courter, John Flaxton, was strolling with his girlfriend along the same country lane, known as Slaybrook Corner, when they saw the ghost.

He said: "We were scared out of our wits. I'm never going up that

lane again at night unless I'm in a crowd."

The rector of Saltwood,

the Reverend E. Stanton,

said: "Several young people in the village have come to see me saying they have seen the ghost.

"There are rumours that a black magic circle meets in a secret hideout in the village and that they are responsible.

"I have no proof yet that they are working in Saltwood, but I'm determined to get to the bottom of this business because it's disrupting village life."

Was red ball of fire a flying saucer?

ONDON doctor is ading an investi-
gation at Saltwood, near
the into the theory
a "red ball of fire"
by teenagers at
brook Corner was a
saucer.

B. E. Finch, a general
practitioner at Finchley,
the KENT MESSEN-

saucer."

Already members of the
London Unidentified Flying
Objects Research Association
have visited Saltwood
to collect evidence from the
teenagers.

Their spokesman, Mr C.
A. Strickland, said yesterday:
"The reports given to me in

been seen."

Mr Wavneay Curva
editor of the Flying Sauc
said: "From the evidence
I've received I'm convinced
that Saltwood has had a
inter-planetary visit.
those that have seen som
thing are consistent abo
the white object in the s
turning red as it got near.
Only one or two say th
saw a figure that may ha
been imagination after



ABOVE: The lanes around Saltwood Church, whose rector, Reverend Eric Stanton, tried to solve the mystery of the Hythe Mothman, blaming it on a ghost that terrorised the village to such an extent that ghost hunting parties were organised and nervous ladies kept their doors locked at night

area. Reports of similar happenings in other parts of the country have been received. But even Mr Strickland was unable to solve the mystery of the headless figure with webbed feet which was seen." The article concluded with another suggestion that the ghost was that of William Tournay Tournay – but, again, why would such a spectre have no head and webbed feet?

As is often the case in forteana, one mystery is put forward to explain another, which is why the saga refused to end despite some prosaic explanations being offered to explain the incident, such as poacher's lights and magnesium flares (ball lightning, although rare, was never considered). Even so, another witness, retired civil servant William Waite, came forward to say that he'd been walking his dog a week before the late November incidents when he "saw this bright bluish-white light, about the size of a golf ball flying directly ahead". According to the startled witness, the object travelled slowly on a steady horizontal course. "It definitely wasn't an aeroplane," he added. "The whole thing struck me as very peculiar. The light appeared from the north, crossed the Sandling Road, where all these strange things have been seen, and headed out for sea."

However, just when it seemed the Hythe man-bird could be dismissed as just a UFO, I unearthed more reports concerning the teenage witnesses that had started the ball rolling – but there were differences to John Keel's account. One article stated that the 'figure' seen by Mervyn Hutchinson was described as "a man in a red cloak and carry-

"ONE OF THE GIRLS SAID THERE WAS A FIGURE ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD"

ing a lantern", and that the teenagers "could not see a head" – which was different from the original assertion that the figure was literally headless. Secondly, the report went on to state that "the figure shuffled up the hill and when it got to the railway bridge it disappeared."

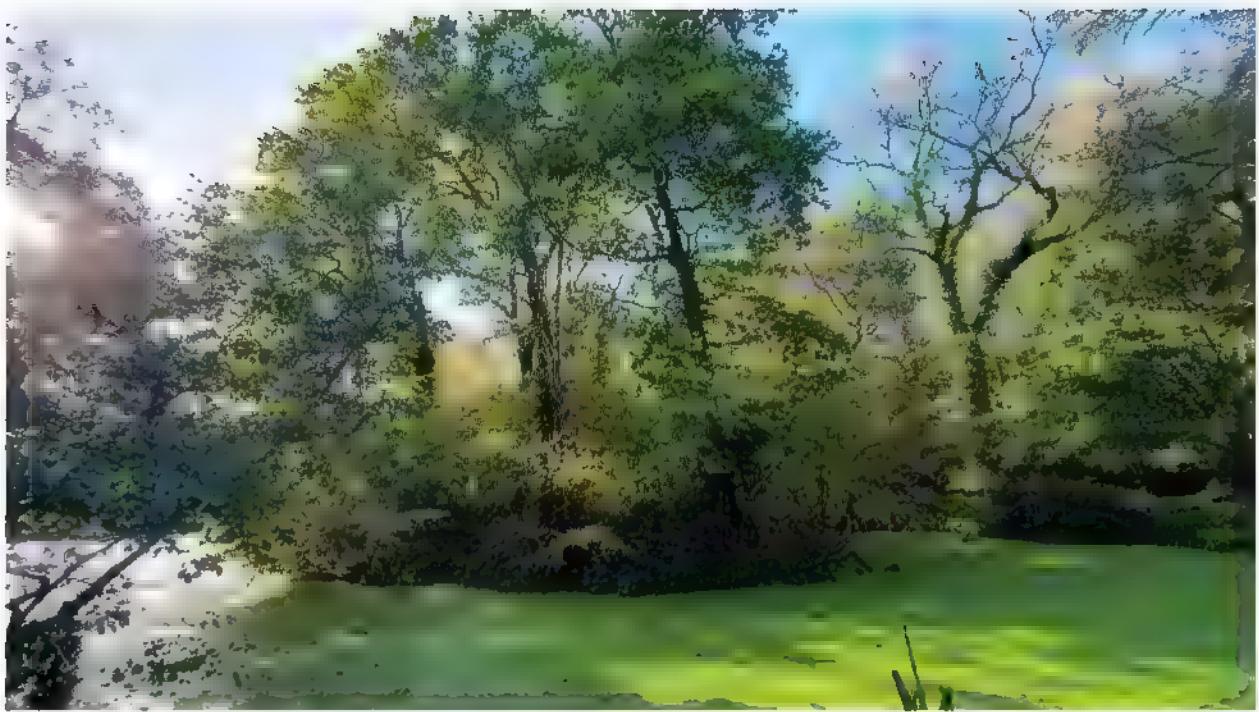
In addition to John McGoldrick's encounter, another report mentioned how upon returning to the area, "We drove along Sandling Road but did not see anything, so we thought we would take a look in Sandling Quarry. We pulled up and turned out the lights; then one of the girls said that there was a figure at the side of the road."

The figure wasn't seen by anyone else, but the unusual phenomenon was also backed up by a motorcyclist named Mr Leggett who had been followed by an eerie light while travelling past Sandling Station one night. Another incident involving strange lights was also reported on several occasions by a porter working at the station who also claimed to have heard weird noises.

By this point, faced with so many conflict-

ing reports, I began to wonder if the area was either a hotspot for strange phenomena or whether things had simply escalated due to the over-active imaginations of local people and the local press. It brought to mind a peculiar rumour I'd heard in the 1980s regarding a black, headless figure seen at Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey. The figure had appeared to a group of teenagers one night as they stood near the beach. The figure emerged from the fog and the youths ran. Oddly, a few years later my father was fishing on the beach at Sheerness late at night when a similar figure emerged from the dense, cloying mist. However, this was no monster but a man in ninja attire carrying a large sword. The mysterious figure, clad in black from head to toe, nodded at my father and stepped back into the fog.

After the initial reports of the Hythe anomaly, ghost-hunting in the area became popular, but then fizzled out after just a few months. Reports of unidentified flying objects were scant then, but have persisted in the area to this day – although I know of no one who has seen the ghost of William Tournay Tournay or the headless bat-winged monster since 1963. Kent has, albeit sporadically, experienced a handful of winged entities over the years, one of which made itself known to me back in the 1980s; again, coincidentally, around the anniversary of the Hythe visitation. It was about 9.30pm and my friend and I were standing around 50 feet (15m) apart outside my parents' house in Chatham – some dis-



ABOVE: The small island in the lake of Brockhill House's grounds where William Tournay Tournay was buried. Today, it's part of Brockhill Country Park and the reputedly haunted house is part of a performing arts college. BELOW: The story of the Saltwood 'ghost' travelled as far as Australia.

tance from Hythe, mind you. We were throwing a tennis ball to one another when my throw hit my friend in the head. He slumped to the ground, clutching his face. I ran over to him to make sure he was okay when, suddenly, we both heard something very big leap from the large tree directly behind us. It swooped down from a height of around 25 feet (7.6m) and hit the ground, running directly towards us. We looked at each other in terror and ran as fast as we could to my house; reaching the safety of the front door we looked back, but the night was silent. Recalling that episode, I'm still spooked, because whatever it was sounded as though it was human-sized – or was it merely the subconscious thought of the Hythe man-bird tormenting me again?

In 1969, four-year old Jacki Hartley of Tunbridge Wells experienced a hideous flying creature she would report, some years later, to cryptozoologist and *FT* regular Karl Shuker via the pages of the now defunct magazine *Beyond*. She spoke of seeing the creature more than once, describing it as three feet (90cm) tall, having a face similar to a monkey and sporting a pair of bat-like wings.

What happened to those mysterious footprints that were apparently left behind by the Hythe creature, I still ask myself to this day. Stranger still, my investigations revealed that during the 1970s ufologist Chris Wolfe delved into the case and apparently interviewed John Flaxton and came to the bizarre conclusion that the youths had in fact seen a crow illuminated by the flashing electrics of a passing train. Someone else even suggested

LOVERS DONT STAND A GHOST OF A CHANCE

• I see that courting couples in an English Lovers' Lane are being haunted by a ghost.

THE ghost, which appears in Slinbrook Lane, near the Kentish village of Hythe, is said to be that of a rich, eccentric local resident who died many years ago.

It just goes to show that a man's never too old to be a terror with the girls.

• The parents, of course, are probably on the ghost's side – they may be getting the kids home by midnight.

• The most interesting thing to consider is why the apparition is an romance.

• Perhaps he himself has had an unfortunate "spirited" ghostly love affair. And that's caused him an "ogre for good".

• He could well have been charmed of a little bit le-blonde over 'till the do 't' and she comes o'er.

• Just like he probably sang, "I Want a Ghoul Just Like the One That Married Dear Old Dad".

• He was so much in love he might have sworn to follow her anywhere & saying, "Wishin' that ghost go!"

• They fell out, however – probably over her dyed hair.

• You don't rock a cradle," he complained one night.

• She probably went off with another spooker. Maybe someone

• ... a girl's best friend.

• The Slinbrook Lane ghost was left all alone in the other world.

• So probably he's really not just a wretched when he appears to young lovers.

• He's presumably singing, "I Dream of a Genie With Light Brown Hair".

• Perhaps the only romantic people who could safely wander hand-in-hand along Slinbrook Lane would be a pair of joyful spiritualists.

• Maybe the spirit wouldn't strike a happy medium!

– Robin Adair

that a scarecrow in a field had spooked the teens. As in many similar cases I've investigated, from London's Highgate Vampire to the many 'ghosts' of Blue Bell Hill in Kent, nothing is ever simple, and sometimes the deeper one digs, the more perplexing the details get.

Even so, when November arrives, I still like to celebrate the anniversary of a mystery that has now embedded itself not only in my psyche, but in the worldwide lore pertaining

ing to what John Keel liked to call 'winged weirdos'. Even today, visits to the area of the Hythe horror, particularly during the autumn season, still raise a few hairs on the arms; but was there really a bat-winged, web-footed monster in Hythe? Probably not. Did the spectre of William Tournay Tournay emerge from his island grave at night to frequent the winding lanes? Probably not. No surprise, then, that the ghost-hunters are long gone, and that few ramblers frequent the area at night. But, as columnist Robin Adair wrote in *The Australian Women's Weekly* on 1 January 1964: "Perhaps the only romantic people who could safely wander hand-in-hand along Slinbrook Lane would be a pair of jovial Spiritualists. Maybe the spirit wouldn't strike a happy medium."

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• NEIL ARNOLD is a writer, researcher and monster hunter. He is the author of *Paranormal Kent* (2011), *Haunted Chatham* (2012), *Kent Urban Legends* (2013) and numerous other books and articles.

CURSED VIDEO GAMES

Just like movies and music, the relatively new medium of video games has given birth to tales of cursed titles killing players or driving them mad, as well as unleashing supernatural threats. **CHRIS WHEATLEY** explores a digital stew of urban legend, online rumour and outright hoax.

Endless debate continues concerning the identity of the first ever computer game (1958's *Tennis for Two* and 1962's *Spacewar!* are generally put forward as top contenders), but the roots of the video game industry can pretty securely be traced back to 1971, when Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney, the founders of the Atari company, produced *Computer Space*, the first commercially available video arcade machine. *Computer Space* wasn't a great success, but its successor, *Pong*, which launched the following year, was, leading to the birth of entirely new entertainment sector.¹

In the 1980s, video games spilled out of arcades and into homes when the first mass market, games-orientated computers became available. In the UK, Clive Sinclair's ZX Spectrum, launched in 1982. With its simple design, low price and rubber keys, the Spectrum became 'the people's choice,' vying for supremacy with the Commodore 64, which also surfaced that year, and which dominated the American market. Tales of cursed or haunted video games date right back to around this time. Our first entry, *Berzerk*, was originally marketed in 1980, and since then stories of supernatural software have cropped up regularly.

Many of the earliest of these tales are surely linked to the predictable moral panic which seems to greet any new technology or trend, particularly those aimed at children (witness the fear and unrest sparked by the *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing game and 'Satanic' elements in children's toys, games and TV programmes; see FT426:28-33). Middle America, especially, grew concerned over kids who haunted 'seedy' game arcades and spent hours staring at a TV screen or monitor, performing repetitive actions in a trance-like state. How-



LEFT: *Berzerk* the 1980 arcade game that led to headlines like "Teen killed by video Game", and not just in the *Weekly World News*.

ever, as you will read below, the idea of the cursed video game may be an old one, but it has never gone away, and probably never will. Digital nightmares await!

BERZERK (1980)

Loosely based on the *Berserker* series of novels by American science fiction writer Fred Saberhagen, the video arcade console *Berzerk*, released by Chicago-based Stern Electronics, was one of the first to feature speech synthesis – novel and startling for the time. Players guided a stick-figure human through a series of top-down Pac-Man-esque mazes, shooting hostile robots and avoiding an indestructible chasing smiley face called 'Evil Otto.' It is the latter who earned *Berzerk* its grim reputation.

According to legend, once a player attained a certain level of the game, Evil Otto would kill them in real life. The story evolved from three documented instances of deaths linked to the arcade machine. The first reported fatality occurred on Saturday, 3 April 1982, when 18-year-old Peter Bukowski of South Holland, Illinois, walked the two miles from his home to Friar Tuck's Game Room, an arcade situated in nearby Calumet City. Bukowski had earlier complained to a friend that he was feeling unwell, and observers at the arcade later described him as "labouring for breath." Despite this, the young man played two rounds of his favourite game, *Berzerk*, setting high scores in each, before collapsing. He was declared dead upon arrival at hospital.

Six months later, a short-lived independent games magazine called *Video Ace* repeated the story, adding a prior *Berzerk*-related incident, this time concerning 19-year-old Jeffrey Dailey



DISNEY+

LEFT AND ABOVE: *Polybius* remains the king of cursed video games, whether it exists or not, having spawned a podcast (*The Polybius Conspiracy*) and made appearances in *The Simpsons* and *Loki*

of Virginia. Video Ace reported that Dailey had died in January 1981 as a result of a "massive heart attack" after playing *Berzerk* for hours and setting an appropriately creepy high score of 16,660 (666). Both these accounts, however, are problematic. In Bukowski's case, the coroner discovered scar tissue resulting from a previously undiagnosed congenital heart condition, while Dailey, it soon emerged, had actually died in a car crash in May 1981.

The second confirmed *Berzerk*-related death came in 1988, when Edward Clark Jr., a 17-year-old native of Lansing, Illinois, visited the Friar Tuck's Game Room to play on the very same machine at which Bukowski had spent his final moments six years earlier. Finding the machine vacant, but two quarters resting on its glass, Clark used one of the quarters and began to play. He was soon challenged by Pedro Roberts, 16, who claimed ownership of said quarter. A scuffle broke out between Clark and Roberts and their respective friends. Both groups were evicted from the arcade, at 30-minute intervals for safety. Clark chose to ignore the arcade attendant's advice not to walk in the same direction Roberts had taken. Roberts, hiding in wait, stabbed Clark once in the chest, piercing his heart. Clark was pronounced dead soon after arriving at hospital. Roberts received a sentence of 11 years for murder, serving his time at the notorious Marion Prison in Southern Illinois.² The mis-reported case of Jeffrey Dailey, together with the deaths of Clark and Bukowski after playing on the same *Berzerk* machine, doubtless laid the foundations for the rumoured curse of Evil Otto to grow.

POLYBIUS (1981)

In the world of cursed video games, *Polybius* stands at the pinnacle – whether it existed or not is another matter. Countless words have been written about this strange video game, accounts of which includes the ubiquitous Men-in-Black, hallucinations, heart-attacks, mind control and abduction. It has been the subject of TV shows, music videos and has even appeared in an episode of *The Simpsons* (S18E3), yet to this day no definitive truth has emerged. Perhaps the closest we have come to an answer lies in the work of producers Jon Frechette and Todd Luoto, whose seven-part podcast *The Polybius Conspiracy* first aired in 2017, though they are far from the only ones to have to dug into the origins of this mystery.

The first known mention of *Polybius* occurred

"THERE WERE STORIES OF KIDS WHO PLAYED IT HAVING AMNESIA AFTERWARDS"

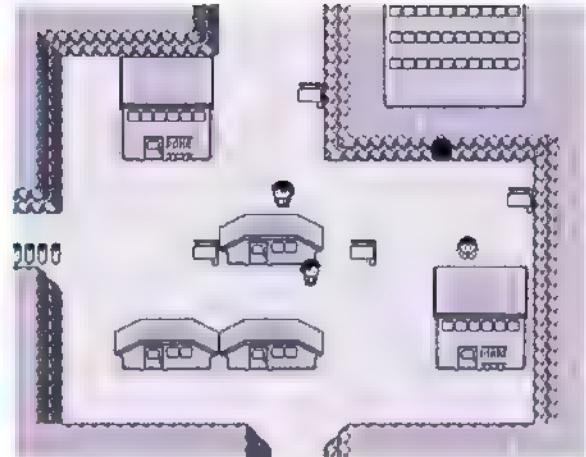
on 6 February 2000, when a listing for the game appeared on CoinOp.org, a website serving as a digital museum/database for arcade gaming. The listing pinned the title's release date as 1981, adding that it "had a very limited release, one or two backwater arcades in the suburbs of Portland [Oregon, USA]."³ The post went on to describe the game as "weird looking, kind of abstract, fast action with some puzzle elements," further noting that "there were all kinds of strange stories about kids who played it having amnesia afterwards," and that "according to an operator who ran an arcade with one of these games, guys in black coats would come to collect 'records' from these machines." The post then appealed to anyone with more information to get in touch, appending that text in the game stated "© 1981 Sinneslöschen," suggesting a German origin. *Sinneslöschen*, it should be noted, roughly translates to English as "mind-wiping".³

Since that initial report, blurry photographs of the *Polybius* gaming cabinet have surfaced, together with further stories, rumours and a supposed image of its title screen, further fanned by an article in the August 2003 edition of *GamePro* magazine, which investigated the *Polybius* case and delivered a verdict of 'unconclusive' as to the game's existence. In 2006, a user calling himself Steven Roach posted on CoinOp claiming to be *Polybius*'s creator and stating that his firm (*Sinneslöschen*) had been approached by a South African company to develop the game. *Polybius*, wrote Roach, saw a limited release, "but shortly after, we received terrible news – a 13-year-old boy from the Lloyd District of Portland, Oregon, had suffered an epileptic fit while playing the game, only six days after the machines had literally been installed." According to Roach, financial backers pulled their support, and the game was scrapped. However the original CoinOp listing for *Polybius* was later updated to include a firm refutation of Roach's story.

"What's really interesting about *Polybius*," observed Jon Frechette in an interview for

Portland Monthly, "is not only the legend, but also these strange characters and stories that orbit the legend."⁴ One such character Frechette encountered during the making of *The Polybius Conspiracy* podcast is Bobby Feldstein, a Portland resident who claims to have been abducted at the age of 14 immediately after playing the game at an arcade called Coin Kingdom. Feldstein says that he experienced mind-altering sensations while playing *Polybius*, and that his kidnappers led him through a series of underground tunnels before he was found the following day, 60 miles (96km) from home in Tillamook State Forest. Feldstein now gives *Polybius* walking tours around the city which, he told Frechette, allows him "a way to exorcise my demons on a daily basis." Another interesting witness is American author Ernest Cline, whose novel *Ready Player One*, later made into a film directed by Steven Spielberg, takes place inside a virtual reality video game world. Cline cites *Polybius* as a major influence on his work and recalls hearing rumours about the game growing up as a teenager in Ohio (he was born in 1972). "There are people who have stories," observes Frechette in the *Portland Monthly* interview, "whether you choose to believe them or not."

Could this be another case of conflation? There is a well-documented incident which occurred in a Portland gaming arcade on 29 November 1981, which affected two teenage boys. Twelve-year-old Brian Mauro, 28 hours into an attempt to break the high score on the classic *Asteroids* machine, perhaps unsurprisingly broke down with extreme anxiety and nausea. In the same arcade on the same day, Michael Lopez suffered similar and violent symptoms while playing another game, *Tempest*, and was later found by police lying prone on a stranger's lawn. Both of these cases were covered by the media. Additionally, it may not surprise *FT* readers to learn that the Government was indeed monitoring gaming arcades, going so far as to plant microphones and cameras inside cabinets, in a bid to crack down on what it saw as illegal gambling (some machines gave out cash prizes.) Ten days after the Mauro and Lopez incidents, authorities raided several arcades in the Portland area, confiscating certain machines. It would seem no great leap to suggest that these events merged in the minds of impressionable teenagers to create the seeds of the *Polybius* story. The search for answers continues.



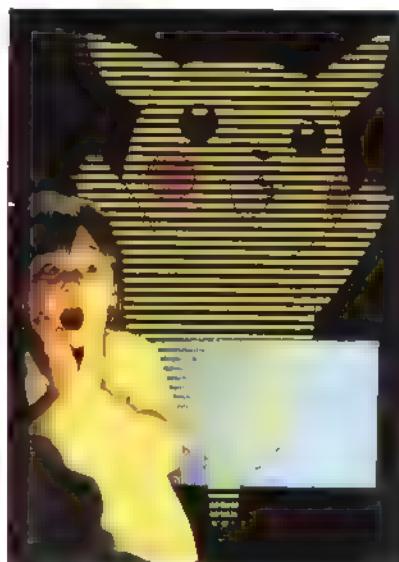
ABOVE: Daunte Culpepper (left) was one in a long line of sporting victims of the 'Madden curse', perhaps the late John Madden's appearance on the 2023 version of the game (centre) will lift the hex. ABOVE RIGHT: Lavender Town in the original *Pokémon* game. BELOW: A strobing Pikachu caused a 'Pokémon Shock' panic in 1997

MADDEN NFL (1993)

Electronic Arts' series of American football video games is one of the longest running and best-selling franchises out there. It began life in 1988 as *John Madden's Football*, named after and endorsed by the successful coach and commentator whose insistence on depth and realism contributed to the series' success. In 1993, EA acquired the rights to use the names of official National Football League teams and players. In 1999 the renamed *Madden NFL* began the practice of featuring a different star player as the face of each new generation of the game. The so-called 'Madden Curse' began when Garrison Hearst, a star running back for the San Francisco 49ers, was chosen as the first ever cover star for *Madden NFL* 99. The following season, Hearst suffered a horrific ankle injury, exacerbated by post-surgery complications, which led to the athlete losing two years in recovery. Since then, a further 16 of 20 players chosen to feature on the cover of *Madden NFL* have suffered similar fates in the season following their image's appearance.⁵

Madden NFL 2000 dealt a double-blow to its chosen players. Running-back Barry Sanders, EA's initial cover-choice for that year, had just established a new record, becoming the first player to 'rush' or run, for over 1,500 yards in four consecutive seasons. Shortly after he was unveiled as *Madden NFL*'s forthcoming cover star, Sanders abruptly quit the sport in circumstances that are still shrouded in mystery. EA scrambled to secure a replacement, with Green Bay Packers' rising star Dorsey Levens securing the gig. Leven subsequently struggled with a recurring injury, with the Packers slumping to their poorest record since 1992.

2001 was the first year in which the Madden curse was openly spoken about. Midway through that season, celebrated young quarterback Daunte Culpepper was selected by EA as its face for the forthcoming *Madden NFL* 2002. A few months later, the Minnesota Vikings player picked up a season-ending knee injury. The following year he recorded



some of the worst statistics of his career. The curse continued, with notable victims including defensive player Ray Lewis. Chosen for the cover of *Madden NFL* 2005, Lewis failed to record a single interception in the 2004 season for the first time in his career. In 2011, Cleveland Browns' elite running back Peyton Hillis graced the cover, and subsequently found himself in and out of the team all season, with a hamstring injury, strep infection and other issues, leading to his eventual expulsion from the team at the end of that year.

Not every Madden cover star has succumbed to the curse, with Detroit Lions' Calvin Johnson enjoying a personal best and record-breaking season following his appearance on *Madden NFL* 2014. Johnson is one of a very short list, however, making you wonder what future players would agree to sign up with EA. And 2023's cover star? No less than John Madden himself, in honour of his passing this year. Perhaps his appearance marks the end of the infamous curse.

POKÉMON RED AND POKÉMON BLUE (1996)

The first instalment in the incredibly popular *Pokémon* series, *Red* and *Blue* were essentially sibling versions of the same game, with differences in the overall colour scheme, plus some *Pokémon* creatures and other elements exclusive to each. Originally released in Japan in 1996 and North America and Europe in 1998 for the handheld Game Boy console, the games were incredibly popular, thanks in part to their 'collect-and-battle' mechanics, which saw players find, capture and 'evolve' 'wild' *Pokémon* to use in arena-style fights. A key component was the games' ability to link to another console, via cable, enabling players to physically trade *Pokémon* with each other.

One of the locations to be found in the game, Lavender Town, quickly earned a reputation for being eerie and unsettling thanks to its seven-story *Pokémon* Tower, which displayed the gravestones of deceased *Pokémon* to the accompaniment of some high-pitched and decidedly odd music. In 2010, Creepy Pasta, a website devoted to horror and urban legends (see FT317:30-37), became the first to report on the so-called 'Lavender Town Syndrome', sharing tales of a spate of child suicides which supposedly occurred in Japan in the spring of 1996 as a result of listening to the Lavender Town music. Further children, the story goes, experienced headaches, nosebleeds and insomnia after hearing the twisted tune. In reality, however, no evidence of such events has ever been uncovered.⁶

Lavender Town Syndrome is possibly a result of the conflation of the in-game location's creepy atmosphere and a real-life, well-documented incident linked to the *Pokémon* animated TV series, which occurred shortly after the game's release. An episode of the popular show aired in Japan on 16 December 1997, entitled "Denn Seushi Porygon" ("Electric Soldier Porygon"). Around 20 minutes in, a scene occurs where Pikachu (the most famous and beloved of *Pokémon*) uses his special Thunder bolt attack, resulting in a six-second segment of rapidly flashing



ABOVE LEFT: The headquarters of Galaxy News Radio in *Fall-out 3*: players have reported hearing strange 'numbers station' broadcasts including prophetic messages in Morse code. ABOVE RIGHT: The mysterious menacing blank-eyed figure of 'Herobrine' is said to haunt the usually anodyne world of kids' favourite *Minecraft*.

red-and-blue lights (a technique Japanese animators call *paka paka*). This strobe effect flared at a frequency of 12 Hertz (flipping every 0.0833 seconds) and triggered symptoms in some viewers ranging from blurred vision and dizziness to seizures and convulsions. As reported in *Skeptical Inquirer*,⁷ some 685 children were taken to hospital by ambulance as a direct result of watching the show. Following the 'Pokémon Shock', as the Japanese press dubbed the incident, the series was taken off air for four months, during which heavy editing was undertaken to remove all similar scenes from the footage (see FT149:36-40 for the full story).

FALLOUT 3 (2008)

Developed by famed software developer Bethesda (who are also responsible for *Morrowind* – see elsewhere in this article), *Fallout 3* is regularly touted as one of the finest video games ever created. Released in 2008, the game sees players exploring a three-dimensional post-apocalyptic landscape based on Washington DC and its surroundings, all from a first-person perspective. *Fallout 3* caused minor controversy in certain countries thanks to its themes of drug abuse and nuclear disaster, and was never released in India, possibly due to an insensitive decision to refer to mutated cattle found in the game as 'Bralumin,' (a class distinction in Hinduism). Nevertheless, the game sold well and picked up numerous awards.

Before long, however, players began reporting incidents of the game apparently predicting the future.

This occurs when players pick up a radio through which transmissions are received from the in-game radio channel Galaxy News Radio. GNR's host, Three Dog, plays a randomly rotating line-up of songs, many of which serve as ironic reminders of the player's predicament – "Happy Times" by Bing

Crosby, or "Easy Living" by Billie Holiday. As well as music, Three Dog offers clues and information helpful to the completion of the game's many 'quests'. However, at a certain point, GNR occasionally interrupts its regular programming to become a 'numbers station', broadcasting a very sad-voiced actor reading a series of numbers followed by a string of Morse code. These numbers apparently reference a date, with the decoded message relating to said time.

Supposed proof comes from one message deciphered as: "22:15 April 15, 1865 He's dead and the blame will probably be placed on that actor, Booth. Johnson better not cheat me out of the payment." This is an obvious reference to the assignation of Abraham Lincoln, but most of GNR's codes refer to future events, with one of the most frequently cited examples being: "9-4-5-4-2-0-2-0-1-0, the Gulf accident, many people died, and there was no oil leakage." If one takes those numbers to mean 9:45 on April 20, 2010 then this tallies exactly with the Deepwater Horizon disaster, which did indeed occur in the Gulf of Mexico, and claimed 11 lives. Although the explosion onboard the drilling rig happened on the 20th, the subsequent oil leak was not discovered until two days later, which would explain the message's insistence that "there was no oil leakage." It has been claimed that another *Fallout 3* message predicted the day and time of the death of actor Gary Coleman (from the American sitcom *Different Strokes*) in 2010.⁸

Times of events referenced in other messages, however, have already come and gone, and proved false, such as "The Queen has died today. The world mourns, as on days like these we are all Brits," with an accompanying date of 19 March 2014. Likewise the surely tongue-in-cheek, "I can't believe Britney's [presumably Spears] actually won an Oscar!" dated 27 February 2023. Perhaps most disturbing though



is a message time-stamped 6 July 2027, which reads: "I can't believe they've actually done it. Not long left. They were warned, but they just had to keep pushing the boundaries of science. The noise, I can't take the noise anymore. And the light, dear God! The universe is slowly unravelling around us. I'm not going to wait for death. I have a pistol in the attic."

Determining the veracity of these reports is difficult. The transmissions are hard to find in-game, and the original posts have long since disappeared. A report by the fact-checking website Snopes appeared to lend credence to the existence of GNR's Morse transmissions, however that page too has disappeared into the cyber-void. It seems we will have to wait until July 2027 to find out for sure.

MINECRAFT (2011)

Even non-gamers will have heard of *Minecraft*, the smash hit video game that has spawned a merchandising empire. The game is particularly popular with younger children, and many a parent will have spent their hard-earned on *Minecraft* figurines, lamps, pyjamas, fluffy toys, towels, T-shirts and duvets. There is even a series of books based around the game, with a forthcoming movie scheduled for 2025. Much of *Minecraft*'s appeal stems from its randomly generated, vast open-world environment in which players can explore, gather supplies, and craft any sort of building or structure imaginable. The game officially launched in 2011 and is largely the work of a sole architect (at least in its early days) – Swedish programmer Markus 'Notch' Persson

Although it contains mild elements of peril, including hostile zombies, skeletons and spiders, there is no 'adult' content in *Minecraft*. Players can never truly die, and the game can be played in 'safe mode,' which removes all antagonistic 'mobs'. However, in August, a post on 4chan's paranormal discussion board suggested something very





troubling dwelt within the game's code. In this now-infamous account, the anonymous user explained that, while playing *Minecraft* in single-player mode, he had encountered "another character with the default skin [player appearance], but his eyes were empty. I saw no name pop up, and I double-checked to make sure I wasn't in multiplayer mode. He didn't stay long, he looked at me and quickly ran into the fog. I pursued out of curiosity, but he was gone."⁹

The user goes on to claim that his forum posts on the subject were repeatedly deleted. He then received a private message from a user named Herobrine advising him to "stop." Our user subsequently made contact with "an informant," who revealed that Herobrine was in fact the brother of *Minecraft*'s developer, Notch. The user emailed Notch direct, asking if he did indeed have a brother, eventually receiving the reply, "I did, but he is no longer with us." This gave rise to the idea that Herobrine was possibly a ghost, and since then a legion of *Minecraft* players have posted their own experiences of

REAL OR LEGEND, HEROBRINE HAUNTS THE IMAGINATION OF MINECRAFT PLAYERS

encountering 'him', with perhaps the most famous being that of *Minecraft* live-streamer, 'Copleand,' who claimed to have captured Herobrine 'on tape'. Herobrine's alleged behaviour runs from the mischievous – moving things around, creating random structures and destroying player's buildings – to the creepy – taking telepathic control of nearby in-game animals, turning their eyes blank in the process.

Copleand later admitted to having falsified his images as a prank, while Notch himself has repeatedly and explicitly denied the existence of Herobrine, including a tweet from his official account in May 2012 that read: "Getting loads of tweets and emails

LEFT: *Minecraft* creator Markus 'Notch' Persson denies that he has a dead brother who is haunting the game. BELOW: Watch your heartbeat as you wander the strange spaces of *Weird Dreams*.

about Herobrine again. I don't have a dead brother, and he never was in the game. Not real. Never was." However during the fan-event, Minecon, in 2010, two years earlier, Notch had cryptically claimed that, while Herobrine was a myth, "there might be a possibility that he is real." Matters were further obfuscated when patch notes for the Java Edition Beta 1.6.6 version of *Minecraft*, released on 31 May 2011, included the line "Removed Herobrine." *Minecraft*'s parent company, Mojang, have gone so far as to incorporate the blank-eyed character into some of its official images, and reports of Herobrine encounters continue to pop up, as do videos purporting to show the mysterious phantom. Real or urban legend, Herobrine continues to haunt the imaginations of *Minecraft* players.

HONOURABLE MENTION

The more you dig, the more you find. There are plenty of video games which could arguably qualify for the 'cursed' appellation by way of their unsettling subject matter, dark reputation, or sheer oddity. *Mad Nurse* is a case in point. Published by Firebird Software in 1984 for the Commodore 64 and ZX Spectrum, the game had players control a maternity nurse running round a hospital in a never-ending attempt to catch escaped babies before they met their deaths by way of electrocution, falling down lift shafts or consuming medicine. Let too many little ones perish and your nurse will be fired! Rainbow Software's 1989 platformer *Weird Dreams* similarly caused more than a few teenage nightmares with its tale of a protagonist, Steve, who is possessed by a female demon called Zelloripus. Steve must wander through a series of serial dreamscapes, all the while ensuring that his heartbeat does not exceed 170bpm, at which point death occurs.

1989's *Taboo: The Sixth Sense* deserves mention as a singular example of a Nintendo game featuring adult themes and partial nudity. Developed by Rare Ltd and released by Tradewest, *Taboo* was essentially a computer-driven Tarot deck, with players able to type in a question, the answer to which would then be unfurled via an on-screen reading. The game came with the following disclaimer: "*Taboo: The Sixth Sense* is not intended for children under 14. It is meant for curiosity value and entertainment only. No mystical or magical claims are guaranteed or inferred." Inside the manual you could find the line: "We are not responsible for what may happen with *Taboo*, or any effect, influence, or miracle that may occur in relation to the game." *Taboo* came elaborately wrapped in a silk purse and has, perhaps inevitably, attracted urban legends concerning players whose own deaths were accurately predicted.





ABOVE LEFT: "Watch the sky!" Is there really a *Morrowind* mod that causes non-player characters to start behaving in odd ways – or is this just another Creepy Pasta story? ABOVE RIGHT: Supposedly a frame from deep web legend *Sad Satan* BELOW: *Taboo: The Sixth Sense* reputedly allowed players to predict their own deaths



by the game.

Killswitch is a great example of the category of cursed games that have never existed outside of public imagination. Supposedly released in 1989 by Soviet (some accounts say Czech) software publisher Karvina Corporation, the game, the story goes, has the player trying to escape from a monster-infested coal mine. Once the game is completed, it deletes itself, rendering it unplayable. embellishments to the story concern a Japanese businessman, Yamamoto Ryuchi, who paid \$733,000 for a copy of *Killswitch*, and later uploaded disturbing footage of himself weeping. This is one urban legend that can be traced to a definitive origin – a short story first published in 2012 by American science fiction author Catherynne M Valente. Valente's story, also titled "Killswitch", is written as a dispassionate third-hand report, which likely accounts for its transformation into imagined history.¹⁰

Further notable titles include *Jvk11662.esp*, a rumoured mod (player-created addition to a game) for Bethesda Studio's popular 2002 first-person role-playing adventure *The Elder Scrolls II: Morrowind*. The Internet is peppered with discussions of this infamous mod, which supposedly drove players insane and altered the behaviour of the game's NPCs (non-player characters) in disturbing ways. After installing *Jvk11662.esp*, *Morrowind*'s characters would randomly wander outside, point upwards and declaim, "Watch the sky." Remarkably detailed accounts exist of *Jvk11662.esp*, but the veracity of its existence remains dubious.¹¹

Another entry into the mythical cursed games category is *Pale Luna*, a text-based adventure said to have originated in the 1980s

in the San Francisco Bay Area. *Pale Luna* comes complete with an entertaining backstory involving a player beating the game and being rewarded with a set of coordinates. Digging at the specified position in the real world, the player uncovers the body of a murdered child.¹²

Sticking with the theme of children, perhaps the most disturbing example of a 'cursed' game is *Sad Satan*, the existence of which was first documented in 2015 on the YouTube channel Obscure Horror Corner.¹³ Rumoured to exist in that part of the Internet not readily accessible through search engines (the 'deep web'), *Sad Satan* reportedly contains sub-luminal messages together with images of violent gore and child pornography, with users sharing tales of disturbing after-effects, including a feeling of being watched.

CONCLUSION

There's a rich fortean seam running through the history of video games, and perhaps that should come as no surprise. Despite being man-made, machines feel essentially alien. Mindless, unfeeling, yet with the power to directly affect our mental and physical well-being. Video games provide endless opportunity to incorporate visual and aural cues. Moreover, unlike a purely mechanical construction, the workings of a video game are hidden behind an invisible wall of literal code, the meaning of which is known to only a few.

Stories of games that can alter a player's mind are understandable, and scientifically possible, but what of those, such as the 'Madden curse,' which seemingly operate spooky effects at a distance? In the final analysis, it

seems only natural that video games should inhabit the same 'cursed' spaces as other creative forms – books, films, art and music, which also have a long history of paranormal connections.¹⁴ It could, in fact, be argued that modern video games blend the aforementioned art forms into one – and therefore embody a triple threat...

NOTES

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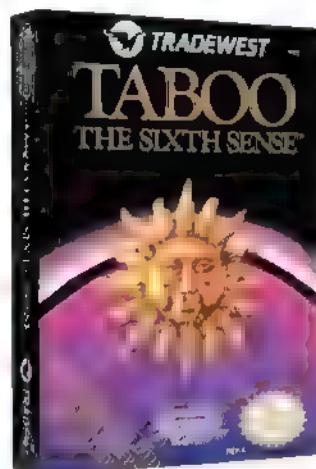
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14 For cursed music, see **FT236:36-37**, for cursed films, see **FT422:36-39**.

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TALES

FROM THE

NEW MILLENNIUM

PART TWO

For four decades up to 2019, Paul Sieveking selected and wrote up weird news stories for Fortean Times. Here he concludes his round-up of his favourite reports from the first five years of the 21st century. For his selection of stories up to the turn of the millennium, see FT390:40-45, 394:46-49.

PERMANENTLY SEASICK

In July 2001, Jane Houghton, 37, from Warrington in Cheshire, went on a week-long Mediterranean cruise starting in Palma, Majorca, with her husband and teenage son. Halfway through the trip she became seasick. "In the evenings, when we were on dry land having a meal, I would continue to feel as if I were out at sea. In restaurants the tables would bob and weave about. I felt like I was constantly walking on a trampoline."

The feeling continued after she returned home. Her doctor prescribed anti-motion seasickness tablets and later anti-depressants, neither of which helped. An MRI scan failed to show a brain tumour. "The sensation of being on rough seas was constant, no let up, even when lying down," she said. "Everyday tasks like using a computer, ironing, vacuuming, all increased the level of motion I felt." She began to feel suicidal, quit her job as an office manager and now works two days a week.

Searching the Internet, Mrs Houghton found the US-based Vestibular Disorders Association. She wrote to them explaining her symptoms and in February 2002 they pinpointed mal de débarquement syndrome (disembarkment sickness or MdDS), a diagnosis confirmed the following September at the National Hospital of Neurology and Neurosurgery in London. It was a relief to have a name for her complaint, but unfortunately there is no known cure. The condition, caused by a malfunction of the inner ear, is not widely recognised and is frequently misdiagnosed. "More than four years later, if anything I am worse," she said. "I wake up and the room is see-sawing. It's just like being on the roughest seas imaginable in a



LEFT: Jane Houghton (centre) no longer enjoys messing about in boats.

little boat. I feel as if the ground is falling away from me all the time... Raising awareness is crucial in helping sufferers know that it isn't all in their heads." She was being treated at the Leicester Balance Centre under the guidance of Andrew Clements, a specialist physiotherapist. "No one knows why some people are susceptible," he said. "There may be a viral component." *D. Telegraph, D. Mail, Metro, 16 Nov 2005. FT207:17*

THEY'RE OUT TO GET YOU

In 2001, a scare story that tricksters posing as perfume sellers were using a knock-out spray to drug and rob women spread rapidly around Britain by email. In the first week of May it was sent to hundreds of office workers in Swindon, Wiltshire. The following week the email, entitled "All women please read (serious)", swept through Derby, Norwich and Aberdeen (and no doubt many other places) with the location of the first-hand witness account adapted for each region.

"I was approached yesterday at around 3.30pm in a Woolworths parking lot by two men," said one message received in Derby.

The men asked the shopper what kind of perfume she was wearing and if she would like to sample the scent they were selling. The woman refused as she had heard that bogus perfume sellers were operating. In fact, some companies (such as Scentura) do hire people to sell perfume door-to-door or in car parks, and they do work in pairs and employ aggressive sales tactics, such as asking women

what kind of perfume they're wearing.

The knock-out perfume urban legend appears to stem from an incident reported to the Mobile, Alabama, police in 1999. Bertha Johnson, 54, claimed that she had pulled into a bank parking lot on 8 November and had been approached by a woman offering cut-price cologne. She sniffed a sample and the next thing she knew half an hour had passed and she was standing in a shop two miles from the bank and the money she had been carrying (\$500 of her own and \$300 belonging to her employer) was missing.

Toxicology tests on blood and urine samples found no trace of an abnormal substance, and in any case a toxicologist said he knew of no substance that could cause unconsciousness with a single sniff. Pretending to be robbed while carrying someone else's money is a classic con trick. The case remains officially open.

According to a Reuters report on 2 June 2001, police in Bogota, Colombia, had arrested three young women who preyed on men by luring them to lick their breasts, which they had smeared with an unnamed "powerful drug". Their victims then lost all

AIRMAN REINCARNATED?

Since he was three years old, Carl Edon of Middlesbrough, Cleveland, regaled his sceptical parents with tales of his former life as a German airman killed when his plane was shot down in 1942. He described the village where he lived and bombing missions, and made drawings of plane instrument panels. A photograph discovered by local historian Bill Norman shows a remarkable resemblance between Carl and a German airman, Heinrich Richter, buried in a Thornaby cemetery. Richter, 24, a turret gunner, died when his Dornier 217E-4



bomber crashed onto a South Bank railway during a raid on 15 January 1942.

The wreckage of the Dornier, damaged by anti-aircraft fire before hitting a barrage balloon, was discovered by water board workers in 1997 buried off Tilbury Road – only a few hundred yards from where Carl was stabbed to death at the age of 22 in 1995 by Gary Vinter, later jailed for life. "It's got to be him," said Carl's mother Val, when shown a photograph of Richter taken shortly before the crash over Teeside. "The resemblance across the eyes and the nose is uncanny."

During the excavation of the bomber it was discovered that Richter's leg, still

inside a flying boot, had been severed in the wreckage. "Carl used to say he lost his right leg in the crash, and he had a birth mark at the top of that leg," said Mrs Edon. On the day that Carl, a rail worker, was murdered, he had been to Skinningrove to collect railway carriages. The day the Dornier crashed it had bombed Skinningrove first and flew on to Middlesbrough following the railway line. Edon and Richter had made the same journey the day they died.

Carl Edon's experiences are the subject of *The Children That Time Forgot* by Peter and Mary Harrison. *Middlesbrough Eve. Gazette*, 15 Jan; *D. Mirror*, 16 Jan 2002. **FT158.12**



ABOVE: German airman Heinrich Richter (left) and Carl Edon of Middlesbrough – a case of reincarnation or just a remarkable resemblance?

will power, not to mention their wallets and cars. This is a variation on an earlier Reuters report from Thailand (29 Dec 1992), where the baddies were Bangkok transvestites [FT72:9].

While this form of mugging sounds intrinsically unlikely, robbers in Colombia have, for the last 50 years, employed a "zombie powder" called *burundanga*, a cocktail of barbiturates and scopolamine. The latter can be obtained from henbane or datura and is legitimately used as a sedative and travel sickness preventative. Large doses, however, can cause disorientation, memory loss, hallucinations, great suggestibility and convulsion [see FT60:32, 79:48]. *Nottingham Eve. Post*, 3 April; *Stoke Sentinel*, 20 April; *Swindon Eve. Advertiser*, 4 May; *Swindon Eve. Gazette*, 5 May; *Derby Eve. Telegraph*, *Eastern Daily Press (Norwich)*, 10 May; *Aberdeen Eve. Express*, 12 May 2001; www.snopes2.com/horrors/robbery/perfume.htm. **FT149:21**

SKULL NAILED

Sometime in 2001, an unnamed carpenter from Houston, Texas, was working on a building site while a colleague above him used a gun to blast nails into a board. The wood split, sending a 3in (7.6cm) galvanised nail into the 56-year-old carpenter's face.



It passed through his eye socket, narrowly missing the eye itself, tear ducts, muscles which move the eye, the artery which brings blood to the eye, the carotid artery to the brain, the optic nerve, the pituitary gland, nerves which control eye movement and one controlling feeling and movement in the face. It came to rest a few millimetres from his brain stem. Doctors say that if it had penetrated any further or entered his skull at any other point, it would have left him dead, brain-damaged, or blind.

By an extraordinary stroke of luck, the nail followed the exact path used by sur-

geons to get access to tumours at the base of the brain without causing damage. The man, who walked into the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston with the nail still embedded in his skull, suffered no brain damage. The nail was pulled out during a lengthy operation and the man left after a few days' rest. "We call him the luckiest man alive," said Dr Anne Hayman who X-rayed his skull. The X-ray, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, is so graphic that it is used to teach medical students. [AP] 2 Aug; *D. Telegraph*, 3 Aug 2001. **FT155.23**

HEAD BURNING CURE

Lisa Reid, 24, who had been blind for 10 years following treatment for a brain tumour, bent down to kiss her guide dog, Ami, on 17 November 2000 and knocked her head on a coffee table at her home in Auckland, New Zealand. When she awoke the next day, she could see. Unsure if the cure was permanent, she waited a few hours before telephoning her mother and reading out a health warning on a packet of cigarettes to prove that her vision had returned.

Ross McKay, an eye surgeon at Auckland Hospital, confirmed that she had regained 80 per cent sight in her left eye, although her colour vision was limited. He had not encountered a similar cure in 25 years of



LEFT: Frane Selak with a fistful of winning lottery tickets. BELOW: Harry Fairweather has a run-in with security after setting off the supermarket alarms.

marriages and, after his lottery win, commented: "I suppose my marriages were disasters too!" He was buying a house, a car and a speedboat, and planning to marry his girlfriend who was 20 years his junior. A year later he was married and had become an actor. *London Times, Vancouver Province, 23 May; Ananova, 17 June; D Star, 12 July 2003; Brisbane Courier-Mail, 30 April 2004; FT176:12, 190:23*

ALL ERGOTIC FORT

Harry Fairweather has an electric personality – whenever the two-year-old visited shops near his home in Winsford, Cheshire, he set off security alarms. His mother Paula, 28, became aware of the phenomenon in June 2000 when she was leaving the local Asda store with Harry after the weekly shop, and triggered flashing lights and bells. Store detectives satisfied themselves that no shoplifting was going on and put it down to a faulty alarm – but it happened on every subsequent visit. "Harry is a wonderful little boy and has become quite a celebrity in the store," said the customer services manager.

How or why this happened remains unexplained. What's more, the boy appeared to have latent psychic powers. "He once pointed to a woman in Next and said she had a baby in her tummy," said his mother. "I was really embarrassed, but then she pulled me aside and said she had found out the previous day she was expecting a baby."

Human beings are electrical machines and the interactions between ourselves and electricity are very little understood. Michael Shallis, a science tutor in Oxford, made a four-year study of 600 people exhibiting extremes of bioelectricity, and published the results in *The Electric Shock Book* in 1988. *D-Mail, 24 Nov; D-Express, 25 Nov 2000; FT144:8*

● Pauline Hutchings, 52, a legal secretary from Amesbury, Wiltshire, set off shop security alarms wherever she went. The trouble began when she had a routine MRI scan at a local hospital in November 2000 – needed because she has a disease affecting her balance. She's had no dental work or new jewellery that can explain the problem with shop alarms. Doctors are either incredulous or baffled. "I'm supposed to be going to Canada next year," she said, "but I'm worried there's going to be trouble at the airport." *D-Express, 24 Feb; Star, 20 Mar 2001* For other "electric women", see **FT47:11 FT150:14**

FOOTBALL WITH LEGS

Shortly before midnight on Saturday, 12 January 2002, Jean F, a young teenager from Villa San Rafael in Calama, Chile, noticed that his pet snake had escaped from its cage. With his friend Nelson C, he went looking for it on nearby waste-ground. The

practice and was unable to explain it. *Independent, 27 Nov 2000; FT144:12*

Various blind men have had their sight restored by tripping over dogs, including Jon Lawrence (1975), John Harper (1977), Bob Aubrey (1979), Joe Sarter (1981), and Dick Roberts (1984). The short sharp shock of a bang on the head has also cured deafness, baldness, and stammering.

● A woman who had been blind for 43 years regained her sight after bumping her head. Miyagi, 53, from the Ami tribe in Taitung, southeast Taiwan, became blind when she was 10, after falling ill with a skin rash. "She lost most of her sight, so when she grew up she could only make a living by herding oxen," said Chen Chih-chung, a policeman in Taitung. Recently, when she was going home from church, she bumped her head against a tractor parked on the side of the road. She went home and put some ointment on the bump. "When the bump disappeared 10 days later she could see again," he said. *[DPA] Bangkok Post, 25 Nov; Queensland Weekend Bulletin, 30 Nov-1 Dec 2002 FT169:22*

D LUCKY MAN!

Frane Selak, a music teacher from Petrinja in central Croatia, led a charmed life. In 1962 he was on a train travelling from Sarajevo to Dubrovnik when it jumped the rails and plunged into the icy Neretva River. Seventeen people drowned and he barely made it to the riverbank suffering from hypothermia, shock, bruises and a broken arm. A year later, he was thrown out of a DC-8 aeroplane between Zagreb and Rijeka when a door flew open. This time 19 people died, but Mr Selak landed in a haystack, where he was found by rescuers. He woke up three days later in hospital. In 1966, a bus he was travelling on in Split lurched into a river, killing four. He swam to safety with cuts and bruises.

Accident number four was in 1970 when

his car caught fire as he drove along a motorway and he managed to get out with seconds to spare before the fuel tank exploded. His friends began to call him Lucky and he said: "You could look at it two ways. I was either the world's unluckiest man or the luckiest. I preferred to believe the latter."

Three years later, he lost most of his hair when a faulty fuel pump spewed petrol over the hot engine of his Wartburg car and blew flames through the air vents. In 1995 he was knocked down by a bus in Zagreb, but sustained only minor injuries. The following year, he was driving in the mountains when he turned a corner to see a UN truck coming straight for him. His Skoda car crashed through the barrier and over the edge, but he managed to jump out at the last moment and land in a tree to see his car explode 300ft (90m) below him.

In June 2003, he won the jackpot of £600,000 with his first lottery ticket in 40 years. Mr Selak, 74, had had four failed





ABOVE LEFT: Nigel Lee holding coins that appeared from nowhere and were flung around the garage where he works in Doncaster, South Yorkshire. ABOVE RIGHT: A sketch by Nelson C showing the strange entity that he and his friend encountered in Calama, Chile, in 2002.



boys recalled that, half an hour earlier, their two dogs had been howling, but it didn't seem important at the time. Suddenly, they saw what appeared to be a stray dog about 100ft (30m) away. They threw stones, but it didn't run away like an ordinary dog, but started to hop towards them like a rabbit. It stopped and stood up on two legs and the boys felt a kind of electric shock in the stomach. Then it started hopping towards them, upright, making a loud dragging noise, and moving only one of its legs. They thought that it might have been hurt by their stone-throwing. It had a weird shape, "like a rugby football with legs" as one of them put it.

Jean retreated, while Nelson felt a strange need to get closer. At 6ft (2m), the animal appeared to glow in the dark. It had a canine head with a flat nose like a bulldog, large flat round ears, legs like a goat's, and "hands" with three fingers. The feet also had three digits and a membrane like a duck's, but shorter. Its grey hair was like that of a wild pig, and the very thick 2in (5cm) tail was tipped in white. On its curved back, thick hair, "pointing downwards", sprouted in clumps down the spine. Its eyes, slanted and pale red, could only be seen when it turned its head from side to side like a lizard. As he stood there, Nelson heard a voice in his head saying "Don't stare, just run away." He felt an inexplicable bone-chilling cold and fled in terror. Though the teenagers were interviewed separately, their accounts concurred entirely. *Jaime Ferrer R., Calama UFO Center / Miami UFO Center, 28 Jan 2002. FT158:16*

HAUNTED GARAGE

Sayers Tyre and Exhaust Centre in Athron Street, Doncaster, South Yorkshire, was apparently plagued with poltergeist activity in 2003. Manager Nigel Lee was bombarded with stones while working outside, although he was quite alone. Inside he was pelted with pennies and other coins, amounting to

about £7 in total, and this time there were many witnesses. "We had all sorts going on at one time," said Mr Lee, 49. "Tyres were moved from one position to another overnight and things thrown about. Coins were pelted about more than once, but only one ever hit a car. The last straw was when I shut up one night and as I closed the doors two lead weights just hurtled themselves at the doors. That scared me."

He heard from a previous occupant of the premises who witnessed a group of ghostly figures in 1961. He was also told that the place was used as a temporary morgue after a landmine killed several people in World War II. After prayers from the Rev Mark Tanner, vicar of nearby St Mary's, and help from a local psychic, the garage remained untroubled by further incidents. *Doncaster Advertiser, 27 Mar 2003. FT172:8*

YOWIE

A Yowie – Australia's answer to Bigfoot – rocked an elderly couple's campervan, as they took part in a weekend stakeout for the creature. Dean Harrison, who heads Yowiehunters, a Queensland group dedicated to searching for the elusive wildman, said the incident took place in a rugged, undisclosed location, west of Gympie. Around 2am on the morning of 11 March 2000, the couple felt their van shaking. "We are over the moon, we are so excited," said Mr Harrison. "This thing had run up to the van and given it such a bang that the man inside, George, had almost fallen out of bed."

Scientists have yet to prove the existence of the mystery beast, known variously as a Yahoo, Doolegard, Dulagal, or Quinkin. However, sightings go right back to the founding of the colony and Aboriginal traditions of similar-sounding creatures are even older. They vary in size from hairy dwarves to 12ft (3.6m) giants. The Aborigines believed in two sorts; the smaller ones are junjudees or brown

jacks, small hairy men that seem to fill the same niche as elves and fairies in the northern hemisphere. In recent decades, Yowies have been seen mostly in remote and mountainous country – from northern Queensland to Victoria, and occasionally further west. The creatures have built up a dedicated following, eager to prove their existence.

George, whose surname was not available, thought that whatever was shaking the van might have been one of the group playing a practical joke on them and got out of bed. "He opened the door and this thing ran off through the bush," Mr Harrison said. "He didn't get a good look at it, but he heard the foliage breaking and the footsteps."

Mr Harrison said that the group had been unable to capture the unknown creature on film despite using movement-sensing equipment, heat-seeking devices, infra-red spotlights and video recorders, night vision scopes and sound recorders. But he said the "definitely not human" creature had left huge footprints measuring around 16in (40cm) by 8in (20cm) each. Photographs had been taken and casts were being made to preserve them. The "Yowie" had also defecated and the group had collected the stool for analysis. *[AAP] 13 Mar 2000. FT134:7*

ALASKA'S MONSTER BIRD

On 15 October 2002, the *Anchorage Daily News* reported that villagers in Togiak and Manokotak in the remote south-western corner of Alaska had repeatedly seen a bird as big as a light aircraft and looking like a pterodactyl. It was at least four times the size of the Bald eagle, America's national symbol. Another sighting was made from 1,000ft (300m) away by bush pilot John Bouker and his passengers while flying his Cessna 207 to Manokotak around 7 October. He calculated its wingspan at 14ft (4.3m), roughly the length of one of



ABOVE LEFT: Fred Hodgkins of Great Yarmouth with some of the fish that fell in his back yard. ABOVE RIGHT: Larsen the lioness with the baby oryx she adopted



the Cessna's wings

Then Moses Coupchiak, 43, a heavy equipment operator from Igiak, saw the bird on 10 October, flying toward him from about two miles (3.2km) away as he worked his tractor. "At first I thought it was one of those old-time Otter planes," he said. "Instead of continuing toward me, it banked to the left, and that's when I noticed it wasn't a plane." It flew behind a hill and disappeared.

Scientists suggested it could be a Steller's Sea Eagle, which may have strayed from its usual habitat in north-eastern Siberia. One was a regular visitor to Alaska in the 1980s. The most recent sighting of a Steller's eagle in Alaska took place on 18 September in Dillingham. However, the maximum wingspan of this species is only 8ft (2.4m). Mr Bonker, who has been flying over Alaska for 22 years, insists that the bird he saw was a great deal larger, and was entirely brown – ruling out both Bald and Steller's eagles. "I have seen maybe 100,000 eagles," he said, "and this was an awful lot bigger than an 8-foot wingspan," *Anchorage Daily News*, 15-18 Oct; *Times*, 19 Oct; *Sunday Telegraph*, 20 Oct 2002 FT166:6

FISH FALL

Hundreds of 2in (5cm)-long fish came down with rain on the Norfolk seaside town of Great Yarmouth on 6 August 2000. Fred Hodgkins saw them when he went outside to investigate after hearing what sounded like hail. "There were a couple of claps of thunder and the sky went really dark even though it was only about 11 in the morning," he said. "The whole of my back yard seemed to be covered in little slivers of silver. When I looked again I saw scores of tiny silver fish. I got my neighbours to have a look because I knew nobody would believe me. One of them found their garden shed was also covered in fish..."

"I live about half a mile from the sea, so the fish must have been carried some distance. They were all dead although they looked fresh as if they had just come out of the sea – but I didn't try eating any. Nobody has been able to tell me what kind of fish they are – but they look like sprats or baby whiting." Three other gardens were covered with fish

FT correspondent Claire Blamey, who lived two miles (3.2km) from where the fish fell, said it was hot and sunny all morning and there were no black clouds, "certainly not at 11 o'clock". In contradiction to wind direction indicated in the *Daily Mail's* map, there was a moderate wind from the northwest; in other words, *out to sea*. Andy Yeatman from the Meteorological Office came out with the traditional "waterspout" theory: that the fish were sucked up from the sea, carried aloft for a couple of miles, and then dropped on land. *D. Mail, Norwich Eve News, D. Telegraph*, 7 Aug 2000. FT139:6

WOOLLY JUMPERS

First one sheep jumped to its death. Then Turkish shepherds, who had left the herd to graze while they had breakfast, watched in astonishment as nearly 1,500 others followed, leaping off the same 45ft (14m) cliff. In the end, 450 dead animals lay on top of one another in a billowy white pile, *Aksam*, a daily Turkish newspaper, reported. Those who jumped later were saved as the pile got higher, cushioning their fall. "There's nothing we can do. They're all wasted," said Nevzat Bayhan, a member of one of the 26 families whose sheep were grazing together in the flock. The estimated loss to families in the town of Gevas, in the Van province of eastern Turkey, was more than £58,000, a very large amount in a country where the average annual per capita income was about £1,555. "Every family had an average

of 20 sheep," said Abdullah Hazer, another villager. "But now only a few families have sheep left. It's going to be hard for us." *AP*, 8 July; *Independent*, 9 July 2005. FT201:12

THE LIONESS AND THE ORYX

An adult lioness in central Kenya known as Larsen confounded the law of the jungle by adopting a baby beisa oryx, a kind of small antelope normally preyed upon by big cats. She came across the oryx (referred to as "Simon") on 24 December 2001 in the Samburu Game Reserve, scaring off its mother. Instead of attacking the defenceless calf, she adopted the baby, protecting it from other predators, including a leopard. She still allowed the mother oryx occasionally to come and feed her calf before chasing her away. The lioness would lie down to rest in the afternoon and its unlikely charge would curl up beside her. On 6 January she led the oryx to the river to drink. Weakened by two weeks of looking after her adopted baby, she fell asleep, failing to notice a hungry male lion, which attacked and killed the oryx. Patrick Muriungi, a receptionist at Samburu Lodge, said the lioness was grief-stricken when she awoke to realise what had happened. "She was very angry. She went around the lion about 10 times roaring, and then she disappeared," he said.

On St Valentine's Day, it was reported that Larsen had adopted a second baby oryx, but several wildlife experts suspected that this was merely a publicity stunt to attract tourists. *AFP*, 7 Jan; *D. Express*, 8 Jan; *Ananova*, 16 Feb; *Independent*, 21 Feb 2002. FT158:26

RASH OF RASHES

Forty fifth-graders from PS161 school in Richmond Hill, Queens, New York, were rushed to hospital on 5 February 2002 after they were stricken with a mysterious rash during a reading class. "My face felt like

it was really burning," said Japreet Singh, 11. "It was really scratchy, then everyone in the room started scratching their arms and faces." Serious skin conditions were ruled out and all the children were later discharged. Only 15 of them returned to school the following day, but the rash got the better of them and they were sent home. Of the school's 773 pupils, almost a third were absent, presumably for fear of catching the rash. No cause for the rash could be identified.

It later transpired that since 14 October 2001, hundreds of school students all over the United States had broken out in rashes on the face, arms, legs and body. For the most part these went away as soon as the students left school, although some children were affected for up to two weeks. There were outbreaks in 14 states – Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, Washington and West Virginia. The number of affected students in each state ranged from less than 10 to about 600. A few teachers and school staff were affected, but rarely parents or siblings.

"For something like this to occur almost simultaneously in different parts of the country is, to my knowledge, unprecedented," said Dr Norman Sykes, who examined about 30 students from the Philadelphia area, where 54 students at Richland Elementary were the first to be affected on 31 January.

In Philadelphia's Quakertown Community School District, where nearly 170 students at all nine schools broke out in a rash, an environmental company collected air and water samples and examined carpets, floor mats, vacuum bags and clothing, but all tested negative for contaminants. Some health investigators suspected a new or yet-to-be-identified virus, perhaps a mutation from the childhood illness known as fifth disease, so-called because it was once considered one of the five main childhood illnesses (like measles, mumps and chicken pox). However, blood tests turned up no evidence of the virus that causes fifth disease.

On 20 February nearly 20 students in a Prospect, Connecticut, school broke out in a rash after they had been outside – all within 15 minutes. A further seven were stricken the following day. Dr Drew Edwards, the school district medical adviser, appeared to disagree with his colleagues. "So far, the conclusion is it's a reaction to some sort of environmental exposure, not a virus," he said. However, a report issued on 1 March by the Atlanta-based Federal Center for Disease Control and Prevention could find no common cause for the various outbreaks.

By late March, Maine became the 15th state to report an outbreak when about 40 children at a school in Phillips came down with a rash on their arms and faces. *NY Post*, 6+7 Feb; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 Feb; [AP] 16+22 Feb; *Education Week (US)*, 13 Mar; *Lewiston (ME) Sun Journal*, 21 Mar 2002.

FT160:27



ABOVE: Mumbai's Towers of Silence in the late 19th century, with plenty of vultures in evidence.

VULTURE CRISIS

India's Zoroastrian community, better known as Parsees, installed solar reflectors in their Towers of Silence in Mumbai (Bombay) in 2001 to help dispose of their dead. This follows a sharp decline in the number of vultures who normally scavenge the corpses in keeping with tradition. The Parsee Panchayat or council, which recently installed the eight giant reflectors in the 350-year-old towers to hasten the decomposition of corpses, was also starting a vulture aviary on the premises with help from a British expert.

The council asked Jenina Perry-Jones of the National Birds of Prey Centre near Gloucester to establish the aviary for white-backed and long-billed vultures (*Gyps bengalensis* and *G. indicus*) – part of the griffon vulture group – as the birds have been dying in large numbers of a mysterious disease, thought to be a virus. They exhibited drooping necks and lethargy and died within two or three weeks. During the preceding decade, the Indian vulture population fell by 95 per cent in 17 key areas, with entire populations extinct in a number of national parks.

Quite apart from Parsee funerary rites, vultures perform a vital role consuming dead animals and without this cleaning-up process of carrion, bacteria breed rapidly on the carcasses. Griffon vultures range from the Himalayas to the Pyrenees, the Alps and South Africa, and the mystery disease was rapidly spreading west, threatening a serious ecological crisis.

The Parsees cannot cremate, bury or submerge their dead in water because they consider a corpse impure and their Zoroastrian faith does not permit them to defile any of the elements. The desert ritual which originated along with their faith in Persia between 1400 and 1000 BC dictates that the dead be left to vultures on hilltops known as Towers of Silence, a practice noted by the Greek historian Herodotus.

Dead Parsees are carried on a simple bier to a ceremonial gate into the private jungle park of banyan and casuarina trees in the city's posh Malabar Hill district, which

surrounds the five Towers of Silence. Here, their relatives hand them over to the socially outcast kandhiyas or traditional pallbearers, the only ones allowed inside. The circular black stone towers, around 50ft (15m) high, are like three-tiered, open-air arenas where the men are placed in the outer circle, women in the middle and children in the innermost for the vultures to feed upon.

However, with an average of three Parsees dying every day, the six-odd vultures at the towers are overfed and unable to cope, although kites and other birds help out. The vulture shortage was noticed before the mystery illness took hold. The birds had been chased away by aeroplanes from the nearby airport and followed the Mumbai slaughterhouses when they were moved to the outskirts of the city. Experts claimed some 100 to 120 birds were needed to deal with the daily inflow of dead Parsees. There were some 76,000 Parsees in India – 55,000 of them concentrated in Mumbai. Sky burial in the city was not popular with inhabitants of nearby high-rise apartments. Those in the lower floors are hit by the stench, while the penthouse dwellers sometimes find that a bird has dropped some morsel of human flesh onto their terrace.

Several Parsees in Mumbai said the solar reflectors had proven effective. They increased the temperature of the bodies on which they were trained to over 180 degrees, cleanly disposing of them within a short time (although this sounds dangerously close to the taboo use of fire). *Independent*, 16 Sept 1992; *South China Morning Post*, 22 Sept; *Scotsman*, 6 Nov; *Sunday Telegraph*, 3 Dec 2000; *Houston Chronicle*, 8 Jan; *Irish Times*, 23 July 2001. FT153:27

Note: For several years up to July 2008, Indian veterinarians injected cows and water buffalo with Diclofenac, a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug. This contributed to a drastic decline in the vulture population, as the birds were dying of kidney failure caused by the drug when they feasted on dead livestock. There was also an explosion in the feral dog population. For the first part of Paul Sieveking's 'Tales of the New Millennium', see FT438:42-47



EXPLORING 50 YEARS OF FORTEAN TIMES

Fortean Times



FORTEAN TIMES #57, SPRING 1991

THE NEW DEMONOLOGY

Following on from Mike Dash's account of the Satanic ritual abuse panic that gripped the UK in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see **FT438:50-55**) **BOB RICKARD** provides some vital historical context for this modern witch hunt in a revised version of his original article from 1991.

The controversy caused by allegations of Satanic child abuse (SCA) provides a good example of how a powerful fantasy can disturb whole sections of society. To make sense of the most bizarre rationalisations, we must look at the imaginative processes and imagery involved.

The Evangelical Alliance and their sympathisers claimed that SCA – also termed SRA (Satanic Ritual Abuse) – indicates a conspiracy of child-slaughtering cultists under the control of supernatural evil. We must examine the evidence dispassionately for proof of that reality... proof which, if substantiated, would have far-reaching consequences.

A precise definition of SCA is difficult because it encompasses a number of allegations which go beyond the sexual abuse of children to murder and heresy. Its meaning varies according to the views of the user and the way in which it is used. From the statements made by evangelicals and others, we understand that the term included the following elements:

- organised groups of perverts, degenerates and subversive criminals who meet regularly
- tentacles of influence and corruption reaching every level of society, forming local, national and international networks (allied to 'snuff' movie and paedophile networks)
- the involvement of respectable professionals including "the highest in the land"
- the enrolling and corrupting of children
- children drugged, hypnotically conditioned, terrorised or brainwashed into committing, or submitting to, acts that violate serious psychological and sexual taboos, or inflicting them on fellow victims
- the domination of women and children as sexual slaves
- the kidnapping and enticement of suitable victims (especially vagrants and young runaways)
- the use of women as "brood mares"
- the sacrifice of selected victims and unbaptised babies (including foetuses induced before full term) and the consumption of blood and other body parts in a deliberate



FROM 1985, UNOFFICIAL LISTS APPEARED OF 'SATANIC INDICATORS' THAT INCLUDED BED-WETTING, NIGHTMARES AND FEAR OF THE DARK

subversion of 'good' (i.e. Christian) values

These component activities of SCA are believed to be organised and supervised by worshippers of Satan (here equated with 'witches') to pervert and mock Christian and other moral beliefs. Though the main issues are listed above, others have been drawn into the mix at its periphery, including beliefs about 'snuff movies', anti-Semitism, and even the dangers of role-playing fantasy games.

Inevitably, the ill-prepared case workers caught in the muddle drifted away from common sense and the new guidelines, themselves inadvertently spreading that sense of panic. Violence against and sexual abuse of children is an unpleasant fact of life and has been with us as long as the human family itself. However, the link between child abuse and alleged Satanism has historical precedents which (as we shall see) have nothing to do with an objectively 'real' menacing cult and everything to do with deep-seated social anxieties and prejudices.

LEFT: A typical tabloid headline concerning alleged Satanic ritual abuse, as shown in the video *Doorways to Danger*

ANXIOUS TIMES

Where Lady Justice Butler-Sloss's 1988 inquiry into child abuse recommended that a child's allegations "should always be taken seriously", it seemed reasonable that this meant deserving a 'proper' investigation. However, some social workers and childcare professionals thought to interpret the injunction as to believe a child's account literally and as wholly factual.

For decades, the state had relied upon the services of religious and other well-meaning organisations to bolster its underfunded and undeveloped social and welfare sector. Without better official guidance, credulous social and childcare professionals turned their back on the world of consultation, discussion, investigation and analysis and found refuge and meaning in the demonology of Christian fundamentalists, leaving the care-workers ill-prepared for what unfolded.

In adapting the Lady Justice's injunction to the appalling 'truth' of the fantastic stories they were discovering almost on a daily basis, the social workers and their allies inevitably saw themselves as what can only be described as the front line against Satan's stormtroopers.

In this 'flight from reason', even normal playground scatology – rude versions of nursery rhymes, thinking farting is exceptionally hilarious, or ideas about eating excrement – became sinister indications of Satanic molestation. From around 1985, unofficial lists appeared of 'Satanic indicators' – which also included such behaviour as bed-wetting and common childhood anxieties such as nightmares and fear of the dark, without any supporting evidence or scholarship to distinguish 'sinister' signs from a normal range of anxieties. These lists were provided by a new breed of 'celebrity' psychotherapists (such as Pamela Klein) and widely circulated in the USA, UK and New Zealand.

through their lectures, workshops, books and conferences. However, the lists were no more useful for diagnosis of SCA than the so-called 'spectral evidence' was in Salem and other witch-hunting panics; in fact, they only made matters worse.

It became difficult to find answers to the growing number of questions being ignored by the caseworkers involved. Did they ever identify and eliminate any malicious lying or attention-seeking? Given the Freudian basis of much modern psychotherapy sessions, why was the notion that child could make up such ghastly fantasies ignored? In many cases, the 'black magic imagery' described by caseworkers was apparently derived from horror movies, fairy tales and children's TV cartoons. Could caseworkers distinguish between healthy and morbid fantasising at all? Did they even try?

The unfolding tragedy of children torn from families that were, *a priori*, presumed guilty was disastrous for everybody concerned: children, parents, police, social and personal justice, and social workers themselves. It was made worse by an almost obsessive secrecy imposed by the care and support services themselves; a practice which was condemned in the 1991 judgements of the Rochdale and Orkney magistrates. For example, sequestered children were forbidden even Christmas cards (or any other communication) because social workers feared the cards might contain 'invisible words' or some other subliminal signs perceptible only by the children, designed to trigger changes in their behaviour or their stories.

This obsession with secrecy also hampered further investigations and, inevitably, caseworkers felt increasingly isolated professionally and ideologically, which added urgency to their continued programme of 'rescuing' children they believed were in demonic and physical peril. Some social workers and evangelicals criticised the police for failing to take the menace seriously. The more paranoid among them suggested that the lack of successful arrests and prosecutions was proof indeed that the whole Establishment was in Satan's service.

Increasingly, the suspicions of SRA failed to convince the courts. In their own defence, the social workers complained, instead, that gathering evidence for a prosecution was not their job. When cases referred to the police for investigation fizzled out, usually it wasn't because evidence was inconclusive; there simply wasn't any evidence.

Speaking on BBC1's *Breakfast News* (7 Mar 1991), Sue Amplett, of the support group Parents Against Injustice, referred to over 10,000 official investigations of SCA in the USA, none of which produced evidence of any organised conspiracy. This was confirmed by Dr Sherrill Mulhern, an American anthropologist attached to the University of Paris, in a discussion of SCA on Channel 4's *After Dark* (9 Mar 1991).



LEFT: A supposed 'ex-Satanist' in the 1989 edition of *The Cook Report* that helped stoke the growing panic. BELOW: The programme also featured Judith Dawson and her Nottingham social workers

have seemed vague, unquantifiable and, more importantly, inexpressible. It would still have to be distinguished from the products of so-called 'guided imagination' – i.e. free fantasising, malicious lying and even so-called 'psychopathic daydreaming' – in attempts to please the interrogator (today's stand-in for the torturer).

In the Rochdale, Nottingham and Orkney cases, we have seen accounts of magistrates and other authorities criticising caseworkers and others for their clumsy methods of interviewing and gathering data. Deliberately or not, considerable pressure was placed upon the children to describe – or to imagine – a distressing incident which may or may not have happened. Because cases were protracted and there were many opportunities to confer, the children usually had a good idea of what was going on. Is it not conceivable that, during these intense and prolonged 'disclosure therapy' sessions, the children could not fail to see a relationship between permission to 'talk dirty' about family and friends and the obvious satisfaction of their interrogators when they did?

After their release by the Kirkwall sheriff, newspapers carried quotes from several of the Orkney children. They claimed that their repeated denials of any sinister rituals were ignored. Some were told they were lying and that other witnesses had seen them at the rituals – again reminiscent of Salem. One boy was even offered a bribe if he could name the man in the middle of a circle. In the Nottingham case, one of the primary girls admitted to saying anything to put an end to the interminable questioning. But the caseworkers chose not to listen to these parts of the children's testimony.

In other cases, welfare workers denied any





EXPLORING 50 YEARS OF FORTEAN TIMES

'coaching' of the children, when it was clear their interrogations had been repeated, in some cases, until the children made statements that satisfied the interrogator. In discussing the Orkney cases, Sheriff David Keible said that tapes and transcripts of interviews "made it plain" that children had been subjected to cross-examinations "designed to break them down and have them admit to being abused". He further ruled that this "amounted to repeated coaching". (*Independent*, 5 April 1991).

FLIGHTS OF FANCY

We don't doubt that religious-minded caseworkers felt genuine fear for the plight of their charges. That these good intentions were themselves corrupted by a potent fantasy is part of the greater irony. Consider the example of Judith Dawson, principal social worker in charge of the Nottingham cases, for we have her statements before us. Writing in *New Statesman* (5 Oct 1990), Miss Dawson emphasised the real dangers to children of physical and sexual abuse, and the possibility that "some adults will use any means to terrify children into silence". She is careful to appear professionally pragmatic, pointing out that "we are a secular team, and the team does not believe in the Devil nor in God... or the power of witchcraft."

However, just a few months earlier, when Miss Dawson appeared in the Evangelical Alliance video *Doorways to Danger* (July 1990), she wore a believer's hat, lending the authority of her position to belief in the reality of Satanic groups "whose main aim is to destroy everything that is good about human life". The video is explicit; cultists, it asserts, are not mere bogeymen with which to frighten children, but actual worshippers of Satan who use the children of their adult members as sexual and sacrificial slaves. In Miss Dawson's videoed opinion, these groups are deliberately mocking Jesus's love of children, and she cites appropriate New Testament passages to prove it.

We have the impression that many of the key social workers precipitating the cases in Rochdale, Nottingham, Orkney and elsewhere, share views as ambiguous as these: officially noncommittal, but privately very Christian. They are entitled to their views, of course; the trouble comes when their professional judgment is subordinated to fundamentalist or evangelical demonology.

Despite denials by social workers that they had been "brainwashed by evangelical groups", a complex pattern of contact between the two is undeniable. Articles on the SCA menace by fundamentalist writers appear in literature specifically targeted at social workers. Social workers were invited



LEFT: Dungeons & Dragons fingered as one of the *Doorways to Danger* in a 1990 evangelical video. BELOW: Satanic abuse survivor Michelle Smith, co-author of *Michelle Remembers*.



SUBSEQUENT RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT A GREAT DEAL OF SURVIVORS' TESTIMONY WAS BRAZENLY FRAUDULENT

to attend conferences specially convened to discuss SCA, at which active fundamentalists were invited to lecture or distribute literature, containing both sweeping generalisations and a complete absence of genuine evidence. Social workers and related professionals also came into contact with Christian counselling groups through casework or tutorials, and those who were likely to be involved in child abuse casework (e.g. police, health workers, nurses, psychotherapists) all have Christian societies with active fundamentalist members.

THE UNHOLY IRONY

The paths seem to lead from UK fundamentalist Christian groups who were clearly influenced by their noisier and more active counterparts in the USA. As Kevin McClure wrote in his summary of Christian fundamentalist literature (FT57:53): "To those spreading stories of Satanic Child Abuse, this is not a matter of folklore or rumour... It is seen as a battle to save souls, fought by those who believe in the reality of demons, and that all the world's religions – except their own – are Satanic in origin and effect."

The first British case was in Kent in 1988, coinciding with a campaign by American activists to educate their UK Christian and child welfare groups about the enormity of the impending danger. As social workers applied the dubious list of 'indicators' to their case work, it became a classic instance of finding exactly what they were looking for. Back in the USA, the British cases were incorporated into the US evangelical circuits as independent proof of the international

nature of the conspiracy.

An illuminating example of this cross-infectious fantasy was revealed by one of the fathers in the Rochdale case, whose children had not been allowed to receive Christmas cards lest they contained subliminal triggers. On Channel 4's *After Dark*, Dr Mulhern said she had first come across this motif among her Chicago cases in the early 1980s, long before the first UK case. Obscure details like this, she said, had allowed her to track the genealogy of the SCA infection in different outbreaks across the years. Many of the most lurid details about the imagined rituals – of abuse, initiations and cannibalism – were 'confessed' by so-called 'survivors' as they were paraded on the evangelists' lecture circuits as proof of both the conspiracy and the efficacy of the crusades against evil.

Subsequent research has shown that a great deal of survivors' 'testimony' – such as in the notorious 1980 book *Michelle Remembers* – was brazenly fraudulent, told by deeply disturbed individuals. In the claustrophobic, self-confirming worldview of the Satanic conspiracy fantasy, each successive story of a born-again 'survivor' can re-infect believers with renewed credulity.

Unlike the mythical Satanists, the network of evangelised caseworkers was a real group. It had real power and influence to reach into nearly every home or level of society. Its unchecked credulity led to the institutional kidnap-at-dawn of children from their families, leaving them terrified and without the comfort of their loved ones, whom they are now primed to regard with suspicion.

A FANTASY OF SATANIC CONSPIRACY

At some point it dawned upon people that the notion of a Satanic conspiracy was nothing new. The origin of this poisonous fantasy needs a little historical explanation, as does its conflation of witchcraft with Christian demonology.

The stereotypical images of witches so familiar to us today have survived relatively

unchanged from the great era of European witch-hunting which blighted the 15th to the 17th centuries. In the beginning, the apostates, heretics and those accused of sorcery were almost without exception from the ranks of the clergy or the Christian community. The stereotype of a Devil-worshipping cult was fully formed by about 1100 – just after the dreaded millennium – and, by the 14th century it had expanded to include first Jews and then witches.

These images and the anxieties they represent are composites that have evolved over considerable time from a variety of older cultural, sociopolitical and religious sources. This was the message of Professor Norman Cohn's magisterial study *Europe's Inner Demons* (1976), which outlines the historical origins of precisely the startling allegations made in the Rochdale, Nottingham and other cases. Cohn showed how the witch stereotype was "derived from a specific fantasy which can be traced back to Antiquity". In its simplest form, it concerned the undermining of every decent value by a secret antisocial group.

One of the earliest outbreaks of this collective anxiety occurred towards the end of the second century BC, when the senators of Rome felt threatened by 'alien' aspects of the Bacchanalia, the festival of debauchery in honour of Bacchus. The cult began as a harmless daylight gathering of women in Greece, but by the time it migrated to Italy it had somehow become a continuous nocturnal orgy of indiscriminate sex and violence. The Bacchanalia and its suppression by the Senate – during which great numbers were imprisoned or executed – set a precedent for most of the pogroms of history, including the belief that any revolutionary conspiracy against the state, ipso facto, involved perverted nocturnal orgies.

When the Christians came to Rome, they were regarded with great suspicion as outsiders (unlike the Jews whose religion was officially approved). The secret meetings of the Christians seemed to the officials to be conspiratorial and became the prime targets for popular slanders. Rumours circulated that they worshipped a donkey-headed god and their priests' genitals, and that their feasts finished with an incestuous orgy at which babies were killed and later consumed.

In this manner the fantasy of a criminal conspiracy was transformed into one of a child-devouring, orgiastic, Devil-worshipping sect. This fantasy was used in Rome to justify the persecution of the Christians, just as the Church used it in turn to suppress heresies and imagined sects of witches and, later, to justify terrible acts of anti-Semitism. At the heart of the fantasy lies a xenophobic anxiety that doesn't have to be true to be effective.

Stalin and Hitler used the same principle: people are easier to hate and destroy if you dehumanise them first.

DEMONISATION OF HERETICS

As the Church became established throughout the declining Roman Empire, its confidence was reflected in the increased attention paid towards schisms and heresies, murmurs which threatened to destabilise its hard-won social respectability. At the end of the first millennium, Church theologians felt they were under attack from Satan's gathering forces, and popular conceptions of the Devil began to change. Satan was no longer thought to be satisfied with causing droughts, famines, epidemics and other calamities. The Church consolidated itself by promoting social anxiety about personal demonic assaults on the lives of individual monks and priests.

Satan was now responsible for undermining personal faith and common decency by insinuating notions of sacrilege, pride, greed, lust, lewdness and violence. Demonic possession became an excuse for and an explanation of obsessional and deviant behaviour. Heretics were people who had already lost their souls to Satan. Heretical movements increased and some made their own ex cathedra interpretations of scriptures or theology, usually influenced by older Middle Eastern notions of the eternal battle between Good and Evil. Others, like the Waldensians (in France and Germany from the 12th century), or the Fraticelli (in Italy from 15th century), were not obviously heretical. They were devout Christians, committed to a simple life of piety and chastity. What made them dangerous was their active criticism of the increasing material prosperity of the bishops and the relaxation of Church doctrine.

However unjust and inappropriate, these

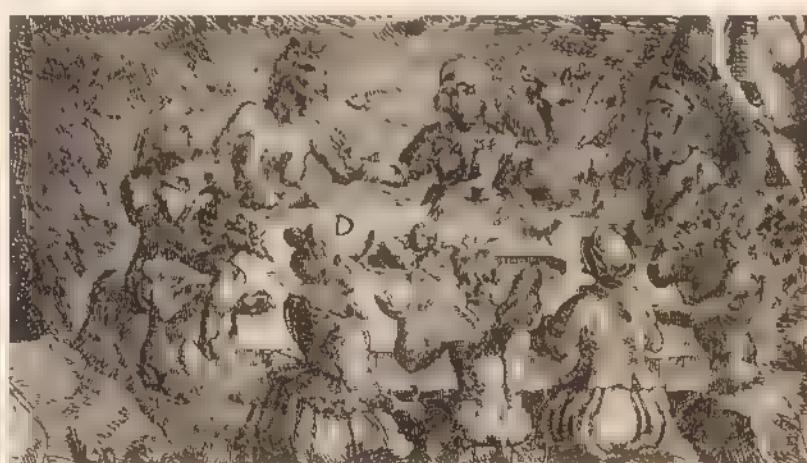
and any other groups deemed dangerous to the Church's authority were deliberately depicted as demonic cults which practised child-murder, cannibalism and indiscriminate orgiastic sex. Similar arguments were used by Philip IV of France to suppress the Templars in 1307. Only by accusing them of sorcery, heresy and inhuman practices could be justify their destruction, break their power and coincidentally seize their assets and wipe out his debt to them. Confessions extracted under torture gave him all the retroactive evidence he needed, of bono sexual orgies, human sacrifice, Devil worship, and the rejection of Christ. The list of 'outgroups', real and imaginary, suppressed in similar ways, is depressingly long.

CHANGING IDEAS ABOUT THE WITCH

Most cultures have a stereotype of a supernatural, life-hating, malevolent feminine entity that flies by night to drain life from babies and other innocents. This vampiric elemental 'night witch' became assimilated to the evolving fantasy of demonic conspiracy through the idea of the Sabbath as a place for cannibalistic infanticide, reinforced by the suggestions of nocturnal gatherings of women up to no good.

Peasant societies in medieval Europe had a clear picture of a witch, usually a quarrelsome, eccentric spinster or widow, bent with age or deformed by disease and poverty. These witches were solitary, performing relatively minor acts of evil (called *maléficia*) such as blighting crops and livestock or causing impotence, and being blamed for accidents and illness. Many of these 'misdeeds' could be prevented or reversed by recourse to these same witches, who functioned also as midwives, healers and creators of charms.

Nevertheless, the peasant witch was an



ABOVE: Witches feast on babies with their demon familiars in a detail from Pierre de Lancre's *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et demons* (1612); de Lancre was a trial judge who burned 600 'witches'.



important part of her community – a midwife and pharmacist – but in the new urbanised demonology the witch became the enemy of misogynistic Church intellectuals already made anxious about the threat to its power-base by the growing numbers of educated women and changing notions of female piety (e.g. Jeanne d'Arc).

When the Church began to suppress folk-beliefs as anti-Christian, a new picture developed quite rapidly, of the witch as a member of a secret conspiracy of evil headed by Satan. Many different threads of folklore came together in the stereotype of the 'Sabbat'. In contrast to the austerity of everyday peasant life, the peasant's idea of the witches' Sabbath was a type of paradise, an intoxicating place of feasting, dancing and the relaxation of social rules, to the authorities, its structure parodied a feudal or legal court; and to the clergy it mocked the Mass, reversing all its symbols.

Like the imagined witches, the outsiders of mediæval society – Jews, gypsies, heretical sects – were accused of *maleficia* and being agents of the Devil. But, unlike the witches, the Jews could not easily be accused of heresy; instead, their inhumanity was 'proved' by the infamous 'Blood Libel' as it was commonly imagined: that in the short time between Easter and the Jewish Passover (with its own association of blood and sacrifice), Jews plot to steal and kill a Christian child and drain its blood for some inconceivable ritual.

About the beginning of the second millennium, these superstitions of anti-Semitism – particularly the allegations of the ritual murder of Christian children and of stealing consecrated Hosts – were assimilated to the historical process Prof. Cohn calls "the demonisation of the heretics".

With their emphasis on knowledge and experimentation in alchemy, medicine and mechanics in particular, the early scientists were synonymous with the stereotype of the mediæval wizard, derived in turn from Jewish and Arabic ideas of magic. Wizards were popularly believed to conjure and control demons by the power of words and gestures; their knowledge was recorded in grimoires; they made pacts, and held secret assemblies and duels of magic. Eventually, these characteristics too were also attributed to the Jews and the witches and assimilated into the fantasy of Satanic conspiracy.

THE NON-EXISTENT WITCH CULT

We have to take Cohn seriously when he says, after seven years studying the subject: "There is in fact no serious evidence for the existence of such a sect of devil-worshippers



LEFT: This woodcut illustrates a panic caused in the German town of Sappenberg, in 1540, caused by the discovery of a mutilated boy. Many of the town's Jews were executed in response.

LIKE THE IMAGINED WITCHES, THE OUTSIDERS OF MEDIÆVAL SOCIETY WERE ACCUSED OF BEING AGENTS OF THE DEVIL

anywhere in mediæval Europe. One can go further: there is serious evidence to the contrary." [Cohn, p.59]

It is now generally accepted that the historical existence of an organised witch cult – a belief that has sustained myriad New Age reconstructions – was an unfortunate impression created by the dubious theorising of Sir James Frazer, the romanticism of Margaret Murray, and those who followed her such as the imaginative reconstructions of 'Wicca' by Gerald Gardner (see FT435:30-37).

Evidence of the activities of alleged witches tends to fall into two broad categories: those citing earlier authorities, and the testimonies of trials and confessions. In his search for evidence of the cult in historical records, Cohn found mostly erroneous opinions, credulous confabulations, bigoted defamations and outright lies. Judicial evidence fares no better and cannot be construed as proof of the objective existence of any type of Satanic conspiracy.

The tragedy is that "in most regions where witches were tried at all, they were tried by judges who were convinced in advance that any witch must belong to a Satanic conspiracy against Christendom." [Cohn p.246] Among the voluntary confessions, there is nothing that is not some form of peasant belief in old style *maleficia*. Of the confessions extracted under torture hardly anything can be said, except that, as Cohn rightly observes, they are evidence only of peasants and other victims conforming to the witchcraft fantasies imposed upon them by their inquisitors.

CONCLUSION

The analogies between the historical origins of this fantasy and its modern manifestations are interesting. There is no significant proof today of a dreaded secret cult. In fact, the myth itself seems to have morphed into nulder suggestions of shadowy government departments and alien infiltrators. It is a fantasy that obsesses persecutors rather than the persecuted. Could this be behind the recent 'Phantom Social Worker' stories arising as they do from fairly ordinary housing estates? The pattern of dawn raids, biased interrogations and the proliferation of accusations are all familiar from the social history of hated minorities, real or imagined.

The SCA fantasy gripped today's fundamentalists and evangelicals, who (one way or another) have passed on their anxieties to social workers. Cohn wrote that the great witch-hunt "can in fact be taken as a supreme example of [...] a bureaucracy acting in accordance with beliefs which [...] had come to be taken for granted as self-evident truths. It illustrates vividly both the power of the human imagination to build up a stereotype and its reluctance to question the validity of a stereotype once it is generally accepted." [Cohn p.255]

Cohn could have been describing today's credulous social workers. Following the collapse of the Orkney case, the leader in the *Independent* (5 April 1991) said the impression "is growing that there is a social work establishment [...] whose members are ideologically committed to a particular worldview and are defiantly determined not to change their methods and procedures." It is a great irony that the child welfare agencies, who justified their child-snatching with the slogan 'Believe the children', could not accept the children's own protestations of innocence.

The notion of a baby-killing, cannibalistic, incestuous, orgiastic Devil-worshipping conspiracy is a fantasy. Without this fantasy, argues Cohn, the great European witch-hunt would not have happened. "It was only where the authorities believed in the reality of the Sabbath, and could use torture to substantiate their belief, that the mass witch-hunts took place." [Cohn, p.xin]

We might add that without it, Rochdale, Nottingham and Orkney might not have happened the way they did.

All eyes on me, please...

PETER A MCCUE takes a wry look at different kinds of egotism in the paranormal community

I have been kicking around on the paranormal scene for quite a time. As the years go by, I seem to notice more and more boasting, self-promotion, and egotism. For all I know, this could be happening everywhere. Maybe people at golf clubs, drama groups, colleges, churches, and choral societies are "getting up themselves" just as much as the paranormal/UFO brigade and their critics. But I'll confine my comments to the field I know best, citing some typical manifestations and one or two of the more egregious variants. However, to avoid causing offence, I'll refrain from naming names.

The people I have in mind fall into two categories: *vulgarians* and *pretensionists*, although the boundary between them is fuzzy. In essence, there's no fundamental difference, because they seem to be driven by the same motives.

Vulgarians lack any sense of modesty, and they're preponderantly male. Therefore, for ease of expression, albeit at the risk of sounding slightly sexist, I'll use only male adjectives and pronouns in referring to them.

An email from a vulgarian might resemble a CV. There'll be a list of the books the sender has written and maybe details of his other "achievements". For example, we might be told that he was the first person from his part of the UK to give a lecture at a UFO conference somewhere abroad, as if that were proof of excellence. And after giving one or two lectures overseas, he might describe himself as an "international speaker". If he's been interviewed on radio or television, he'll certainly tell us that. His email might list organisations that he founded, although it's likely that the



The aim is to impress the reader with the writer's erudition

reader will never have heard of them before ("The Broadchester Regional College of Scientific Parapsychology", "The West of England Institute for Advanced Training in Metaphysical, UFO and Paranormal Investigation").

Vulgarians are great namedropers. If they're acquainted with well-known authors or researchers, they'll let it be known: "Dr Michael Highflyer will be addressing our prestigious conference next month, and I'm proud to say that he's a good friend of mine." At the conference, the vulgarian will make sure that he's photographed beside his "good friend", and the vulgarian's body language, such as wrapping an arm around the speaker's shoulders while a photo is taken, might imply dominance or superiority. A slightly embarrassed look on the speaker's face might be an indication that he's not used to such close body contact with semi-strangers.

If the vulgarian is simply a speaker at a conference and not

one of the presenters, he'll probably spend the bulk of his time in the foyer, sitting at a table, trying to sell his self-published books, which will typically lack an index. I'm aware of one author who has gone further in brazen self-promotion: giving high praise and a five-star review to at least two of his own books on Amazon!

Vulgarians and pretensionists tend to be "takers", not "givers". They'll respond promptly to messages from people offering interesting information that can be incorporated into future books or articles; but with people they don't know well, they're often discourteous, not even bothering to reply to communications.

Despite their highly-publicised "achievements", vulgarians often express themselves in standard English. The plural noun "phenomena" causes them particular difficulty ("This phenomena is real!"). And the titles or subtitles of their books sometimes contain errors, such as the omission of an apostrophe (*A Psychic Investigators [sic] Guide to the Ghosts of Broadchester*).

Academically, pretensionists tend to be better qualified than their vulgarian counterparts, and their command of English is usually better. Their self-aggrandising tactics tend to be subtler. For instance, if a vulgarian has attended a prestigious university, he'll boast about it from the outset, whereas a pretensionist might allude to it indirectly ("I didn't really know much about psychical research until I went up to Cambridge.") Some years ago, I was at a conference where a speaker referred to himself and "other scholars". He was clearly implying that he considered himself to be a "scholar". Needless flaunting of academic qualifications is another pretensionist trait. Unburdened by modesty, someone on the current psychical research scene lists "MA (Distinction)" among his degrees!

Pretensionists are inclined to litter their prose with arcane

words and convoluted jargon, which means that readers often find themselves swimming through verbal treacle. A book published a few years ago, a compilation of essays by various authors, contained some chapters with ridiculous titles, such as "Liminal spaces and luminal minds: boundary thinness and participatory eco-consciousness" and "Taking soul birds seriously: a post-secular annalist perspective on extra-ordinary communications". A recently published journal article is a masterpiece of opacity. For example, it refers to studies suggesting that ghostly anomalies "comprise a statistical hierarchy of perceptual contents... that shift in their order according to the perceptual-personality profiles of experiencers... or the situational context".

Another pretensionist ploy is the unnecessary inclusion of untranslated foreign language expressions within books and articles. The aim is no doubt to impress readers with the writer's erudition and broad vocabulary, but such self-indulgence can make the writing needlessly turbid.

How do pretensionists get away with expressing themselves so opaque? One reason may be that readers and listeners are intimidated – too afraid to say that they don't understand what they're reading or hearing, fearing that their associates will consider them to be either dim or ignorant. Publishers, editors and peer reviewers have a lot to answer for in accepting material that lacks clarity. A third factor is probably just old fashioned politeness: afraid of appearing rude or negative, people might refrain from complaining about pretensionist language – even when the complaints would be more than justified. .

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Amazing facts about strange stories

STU NEVILLE recalls a youthful encounter with a 1970s compendium of random oddities – the book that first set him on the path of the weird

It was a typical day at school around 1979. Having strategically feigned a sprained ankle in order to get out of cross-country running, I was confined to the library with the suggestion that I could maybe do some homework (for once). Instead, I noticed a book, that would (for once) actually change at least part of my life. *The Reader's Digest Book of Strange Stories and Amazing Facts* (hereafter RDSSAF) sang to me like a shelf-bound siren. Its cover alone grabbed my attention – some fops being startled by another fop riding a bear into a Georgian dining room; a snake eating an egg; what looked like Charles Dickens with a big shard of something; and the incredible melting man (actually a Kirlian photograph, but I didn't know that then).

Opening the front cover, it promised "Stories that are bizarre, unusual, odd, astonishing, incredible... but true" (yeah, we'll come back to that). Having already used 25 per cent of the book's superlative allocation, I flipped to the contents and the very first thing that struck me was its similarity to the *Guinness Book of Records* of the same era: in those far-off days of the 1970s under the joint and several editorship of the McWhirters, the book always contained a great deal of narrative and exposition (I particularly remember the 1973 edition, which had a several-page article on very tall and heavy people): it was actually readable, as opposed to the later versions which are more like a factual edition of *Exchange and Mart*. Even the RDSSAF layout was similar, with considered categories. Part 1 was about the natural world



ABOVE: English eccentric 'Mad Jack' Mytton decides to enliven a dinner party by riding a bear into the dining room.

It promised "stories that are unusual, odd, incredible... but true"

and space, Part 2 about human discovery and endeavour and part 5 – "The World Of Tomorrow" – had the usual hilariously inaccurate predictions of how we all live now, what with our flying cars, meals in tablet form and holograms. (One of my personal favourites is the hoverbed for burns patients, on which patients had to remain absolutely flat and prone, as if they turned on their side they'd fly off into the nurses' station). On the other hand, the power and use of computers is drastically underestimated and the Internet wasn't even a dream. However, we all know nothing dates faster than the future and it would be unfair to criticise what was actually a best guess, and given the contributors list – Patrick Moore, Magnus Magnusson and Isaac Asimov among them – thus wasn't just thrown together.

There are some fascinating nuggets in the early parts. "The Astonishing Human Body" has the usual factoids: enough iron to make a one inch nail, the same amount of carbon as 12kg of coal, enough fat to make seven bars of soap (nuking one wonder if *Fight Club* author Chuck Palahniuk had read this, too) plus stuff on body clocks and acupuncture, and a puzzling montage asserting that modern man – pictured in his flared bri-nylon suit, kipper tie and side-parting – is an inch shorter on average than Old-Stone-Age man, here represented by a naked Geezer Butler from Black Sabbath toting a hand-axe. Quite how they reach this conclusion isn't stated, which is fairly consistent with the rest of the book. Then on to "Wonders of the Natural World", which offers volcanoes,

tectonics and the confident assertion that Atlantis was actually the island of Santorini. It also reveals that the British mainland is tilting along an axis that runs north through Devon and South Wales to Yorkshire, apparently because the last ice sheet weighed it down and

now it's springing back up like a seesaw, albeit very slowly; a briefly hoped-for prospect of people on Anglesey being catapulted skywards won't come to pass. This is a fascinating goblet, but the most glaring deficiency of the book – limited space to explore concepts – sadly comes into play and it merits scarcely half of one



column. However, it does lead on to asking whether the Ice Age will return (mammoths, skating on the Thames, you know the drill). There's an early mention of the

Greenhouse Effect and a novel proposal to prevent the onslaught of ice sheets by spreading acres of black plastic over the countryside, ignoring the effect this might have on whatever's underneath it.

Onward we go, looking at the properties of gold: it transpires it's not Dickens on the front with a big shard of something but rather an un-named gentleman with the world's largest gold-bearing nugget, unearthed in Australia in 1872. Old trees, big trees, small organisms; old animals, big animals, small animals... you get the idea.

For our purposes, though, it's parts 3 and 4 that butter the parsnips. "Strange customs and Superstitions" is a useful repository of local beliefs, some reasonable (not walking under a ladder in case something falls on you), some rooted in old wisdom (iron to ward off evil) and others somewhat opaque, such as not cutting both ends of a loaf of bread as it will let the Devil out, not throwing vegetables on the fire in Scotland for similar reasons, and Maltese church clocks having two faces one with the right time and the other with the wrong one, once again in order to confuse Old Nick (and presumably everyone else). Bells, tattoos, whistling and sundry maritime superstitions (bundle of neuroses, sailors) soon give way to rituals around death and burial, screaming skulls and voodoo, and then to the bizarre world of initiation rites, culminating in the American First Nation Mandan tribe, whose O-Kee-Pa ordeal – various forms of mutilation, including being suspended from hooks through the pectorals – memorably re-enacted in the 1970 Richard Harris movie *A Man Called Horse* (for no apparent reason, he then goes through it all over again in the imaginatively-titled sequel, *The Return of a Man Called Horse*).

On next to "Popular Facts and Fallacies": Flat-Earthers get an early outing, there's a bit about Hollow Earth theories, and an interestingly dated amble through various myths, such as whether flying fish actually fly, whether hairy men are stronger than non-hairy men, if thrashing about in the water will scare sharks away (could be crucial to know this in advance) and who actually invented the



ABOVE: Bernhardt Holtermann, for it is he, proudly displays his huge nugget.

umbrella, which I had to admit as hotly-contested myths go had passed me by. "Intriguing And Unsolved Mysteries" has some gems too, including some magnificently bonkers theories about how the dinosaurs died out, such as a lemming-style mass suicide and *Paleoweltshmerz*, the idea that they all became so disillusioned that they died of existential angst. I'm not making this up. We revisit some classic historical mysteries (Princes in the Tower, Man in the Iron Mask – despite Dunn, it was actually made of velvet and the wearer had both 24-hour room service and a sea-view) before alighting on one of our contemporary favourites, the Oak Island Money Pit. These days, the island resembles an industrial drift-mine the size of Taunton, but back then it was still a 13-ft (4m) diameter hole with a ladder in it and had already seen nearly two centuries of failed-treasure hunting history; nice to see it continues to hold the same allure today. Plus: Jacks of both Spring-Heeled and Ripper varieties, the Angels of Mons, what happened to the Romanovs? (spoiler: they all died) As a literary time-capsule the whole book is very instructive as to attitudes towards forteana and other weird-

ness in the early 1970s. Being just about contemporaneous with Von Däniken, Charles Berlitz, much of Peter Underwood's output and the first season of *In Search Of...*, RDSSAF is very much of its time, reflecting the brave new world we were promised by Tomorrow's World and the like.

Then we take "Footsteps Into The Unknown": the Turin Shroud, Padre Pio, Spontaneous Human Combustion (unusually, there's no photo of Bentley's charred leg, usually standard in such discussions). Then you turn the page to be confronted with the somewhat terrifying sight – to a 12-year-old cross-country dodger, at any rate – of the Beiméz faces, which mysteriously appeared on the kitchen floor tiles of a family home in Southern Spain: they resisted all attempts at erasure, instead merely altering the expressions. The accompanying photos have deeply sinister, almost Crowley-like feel to them. Despite intense scientific scrutiny, the mystery was never solved, and after a few weeks, according to the book, they simply melted away, never to return; in fact, they have periodically returned ever since, and in 2014 the floor underwent state-of-the-art analysis on the

investigative TV show *Cuarto Milenio*, which found no trace of paint or pigments and saw a professor of chemical engineering unable to replicate the effects).

On through coincidences, curses, the *Titanic*, polts, Borley, the Barbados coffins and ever-present cutlery-botherer Uri Geller, before we get to legendary lands and beasts, with tales of mermaids and kraken, and a whole four pages devoted to lake monsters (primarily Nessie) but only two devoted to man-beasts. Again, it's a good indication of how emphases change, as apart from anything else the Yeti gets slightly higher billing than Bigfoot; these days the big hairy buggers would probably get a whole chapter to themselves. The lands of Prester John, Cynocephales and unicorns lead us on to vampires and werewolves before we exit the weirdness gallery and get onto part 4, an amusing romp through hoaxes, frauds, scanks and eccentrics such as John "Mad Jack" Mytton (yes, he's the one pictured on the front cover astride a bear) and Regency thespian Robert "Romeo" Coates, still generally acknowledged at the time the book was written as having been the world's worst ever actor (*Hollyoaks* didn't premiere until 1995).

Despite all the things in the book we now know to be incorrect – or, on the other hand, vindicated – and the necessary brevity with which it has to deal with so many topics, RDSSAF is still incredibly readable, and often quite charmingly so. It's taken me far too long to write this, as I kept getting side-tracked by a "Blimey, I wonder whatever happened to that" response followed by hours of research. As rainy Sunday afternoon entertainment, it's hard to beat. If you still possess a copy, I urge you to dust it off and dip in – if not, it's available cheaply second hand, and trust me, you won't be disappointed.

As for me, I still have the first copy I ever owned. I smuggled it out of the school library in my bag full of unused sports-kit.

• STU NEVILLE is a lifelong fortean, an administrator of the Forteana Forums and FT's TV column st. When not embroiled in weirdness he works for a training company.

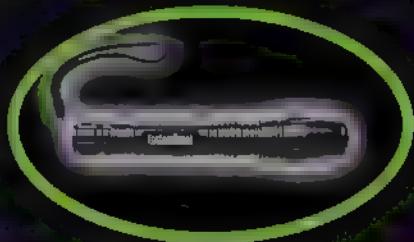
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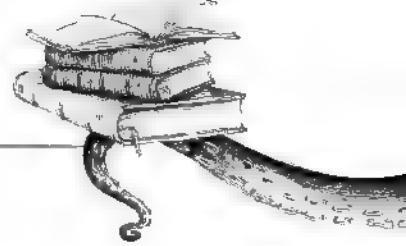
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Betty and Barney Hill, listened to

A detailed socio-historical account of one of the most famous UFO abduction cases remains a deeply human story, treating its subjects with dignity and respect, writes **Mark Pilkington**

The Abduction of Betty and Barney Hill

Alien Encounters, Civil Rights and the New Age in America

Matthew Bowman

Yale University Press 2023
Hb. 278pp. £25, ISBN 9780300251388

Matthew Bowman, a religious historian who has written on that very UFO-adjacent American church, Mormonism, asks us to cast our minds back to 1961, a time when segregation was still a part of American life, people trusted scientists and their government and, perhaps most shockingly of all, almost nobody had heard of alien abductions.

The story of Betty and Barney Hill's late night encounter with something in the mountainous New Hampshire wilderness has been told many times in magazines, books, films (a new dramatisation is in the works from Barack Obama's production company) and TV programmes, but never in such meticulous, wide-ranging detail as in Bowman's account.

At the core of his sympathetic investigation are, of course, Barney and Betty Hill, two remarkably strong-headed individuals determined to change society for the better. While the inter-racial nature of their marriage is often noted – Barney was black, Betty white – the depth of their involvement with progressive politics, particularly in improving the lot of America's black communities, is usually glossed over.

Not so here. Bowman honours both Barney and Betty with richly detailed, deeply human portraits. Barney we learn, was a prominent and highly-respected public representative for both local and state civil rights

movements, while Betty bucked powerful social trends by leaving a failed marriage, re-entering education, changing careers to become a social worker and marrying Barney, also divorced.

Both were active in the progressive, science-friendly Unitarian church, something Bowman sees as central to their response to the strange turn that their life took. Their Unitarianism, with its faith in science and fair governance, drove them, at least initially, to seek explanations for their experience from the authorities: at first the US Air Force, and then, three years later, with prominent psychologist Benjamin Simon, who had worked extensively with military veterans suffering from what would later become known as PTSD.

Simon felt sure that the couple had seen something in the sky and, after many hours of hypnotic sessions, was left in no

doubt that their experience was traumatic, particularly to Barney, who we would now recognise as suffering from PTSD. Simon was not, however, persuaded that an actual abduction by extraterrestrials had taken place – the inconsistencies in their accounts led him to feel sure that this part of their memory was driven and influenced by the dreams that plagued Betty in the days following their initial experience, and by the pressures in their own lives.

While they both worked hard for a better future, the present remained uneasy, especially for

She shouted: "Do you want to know where Barney is? Barney died. He is no longer alive"

Barney. His hypnosis sessions make painfully clear that his anxieties about race, and how people viewed his and Betty's relationship, were always present: "I believe in the hostility of white people, particularly when there is an interracial couple," he tells Simon. He put a pistol in the boot of their car before setting off on their fateful road trip, and vividly describes the fear he feels seeing rural roughnecks in a diner shortly before their UFO encounter. Barney's initial description of the UFO's occupants presents them as human: "a red-headed Irishman ... because Irish are usually hostile to Negroes" and a "German Nazi" wearing a cap, jacket and scarf.

Betty's memory of the beings is markedly unlike Barney's. In a fascinating passage, Bowman recognises in her description of their abductors' facial features – later standardised to form the iconic Greys – the evolutionary race theories of anthropologist Carleton Coon, who they had seen speak in 1964 – just as they began their sessions with Dr Simon. (Martin Kottmeyer's observation of parallels between their aliens' appearance and *The Outer Limits* episode "The Bellerive Shield" also gets a mention.)

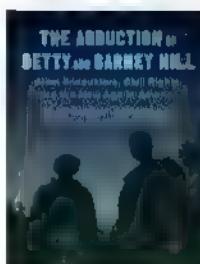
Betty's engagement with her captors is also very different from her husband's. Her Unitarian sense of cosmic awe overrides the fearful nature of the experience – even the painful medical procedures that emerged under

hypnosis, like the long needle inserted into her womb or, in a detail censored from early accounts, Barney's "memory" of semen being extracted from his penis with a suction cup and a tube inserted into his rectum. Betty remains full of wonder at the beings' advanced technologies, most famously a star map which later gave rise to the idea that her ETs originated in the Zeta Reticuli system – another lasting UFO mème arising from her story.

The many stresses of Barney's life – his exhausting postal work schedule, his intense activism, the pressures of his familial relations, and not to mention his anxieties as a black man living in the public eye – took a toll, and he died of a cerebral haemorrhage at 46. About a week after his packed funeral, Betty was driving along a dark country road when she saw two red lights on a craft like that she and Barney had seen less than a decade previously. She stopped and shouted at the lights: "Do you want to know where Barney is? Barney died. He is no longer alive." In tears she gestured towards the cemetery in which he'd been buried. The lights "rocked back and forth three or four times, crossed the highway, and headed in the direction I had pointed". Following Barney's death, Betty follows the prevailing cultural winds in America and seeks answers to their mystery in New Age ideas.

In trying to tell their story, and make sense of it, all the Hills wanted was to be listened to, and to be treated with dignity and respect. *The Abduction of Betty and Barney Hill* does just that; and, despite its wide socio-historical lens, it remains a deeply human story – much like the history of the UFO experience itself.

★★★★★



The magic of the Duchy

Marcus Williamson finds that Cornish culture has unique esoteric aspects

Magic & Modernism

Art from Cornwall in Context 1800-1950

Rupert White

Antenna 2023

Pb. 390pp. £10. ISBN 978837636063

Ill-Wished

Witchcraft and Magic in 19th-Century Cornwall

Rupert White

Antenna 2023

Pb. 232pp. £8.95. ISBN 9788388361716

There is no shortage of popular and scholarly studies on Cornwall and its folklore and customs, nor indeed on its artists, both homegrown and incommers to the area. But few authors have documented the plurality of interconnections between the art scene of Cornwall and the magical and folklore traditions that serve as its inspiration.

In *Magic & Modernism* Rupert White has taken that leap. As he points out: "Existing narratives have tended to describe the activities of the artists as if they relate only to art-history and to aesthetic concerns that belong to an exclusive, even elitist art-world." This work takes us on a richly illustrated and winding journey through the rediscovery by occultists and artists of a distinctly Cornish Celtic identity, already understood and appreciated by the Duchy's native inhabitants.

Beginning with a reflection on British culture in general, White goes on to consider the mineral collectors and antiquarians, early visitors from outside, who studied Cornwall's extensive prehistoric remains. He continues in a discussion of how research by folklorists and the reconsideration of the

Arthurian Grail legend coincided synchronistically with the arrival of the railway, providing the seeds for a flourishing of interest in Cornish culture and folklore.

From a land rich in tin to a land enriched by tourism, White shows how heavy industry and mining gave way to Cornwall becoming a holiday destination. It is, he says, "popular in progressive, literary and bohemian circles" because of its clear distinction from what we understand as England, "out on a limb" both geographically and culturally. This sense of otherness was exemplified by DH Lawrence: "Cornwall isn't England. It isn't really England, nor Christendom. It has another quality: of King Arthur's days, that flicker of Celtic consciousness before it was swamped under Norman and Teutonic waves."

We learn of the profound influence that the land's culture has had on writers including Havelock Ellis, Aleister Crowley and Mary Butts, as well as artists as diverse as Alfred Wallis, Grace Paultorpe and Ithell Colquhoun, all of whom chose Cornwall as their home at some point in their creative careers.

Ill-Wished is a curious volume which, White says, arose as a side project during his research for his books on Cornish magic and creative culture. In 99 extracts from local and regional newspaper articles of the 19th century, the collection

describes the phenomenon of being "ill-wished" (cursed) and the cottage industry that consequently evolved, offering victims the chance to undo the curse. The fascinating anthology of articles relates very human stories of misfortune, blame and redemption and provides biographies of the fortune tellers, pillars or cunning folk who offered their services to help those who were "wished" and sought to be cured.

Magic & Modernism ★★

★★★



Magic & Modernism ★★

★★★

Robert Aickman

A Biography

RB Russell

Tartarus Press 2023

Pb. 436pp. £24.95. ISBN 9788375631400

In the world of weird tales, Robert Aickman (1914-81) is the link between the Golden Age stories of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras and the modern revival in "literary" horror. Aickman was an old-fashioned English gent, down-at-heels on the Bloomsbury fringes, with all the classic snobberies, sexual repressions and mother-fixations you'd hope for fully present and correct.

He felt adrift in the modern world of hellish mechanisation, and this unease seeped everywhere into his mastery of mood in the irresolute and unnerving tales he preferred to call "strange stories".

Once cherished only by aficionados, revived in small press runs, Aickman has since around 2008 been republished by mainstream presses Faber and New York Review Books, and his influence has been acknowledged by a range of contemporary figures from Jeremy Dyson of *The League of Gentlemen* to the leading novelist M John Harrison.

Aickman's biographer is RB Russell, a writer who also runs the Tartarus Press, which has pioneered the reissue of nearly all of Aickman's short story collections and novels over the years. Russell is an authoritative guide to Aickman's strange career, in which writing tended to be crammed into the edges because he spent much of the post-1945 years battling to rescue England's abandoned and crumbling canal system. The Inland Waterways Association was Aickman's baby, and the focus of his energies and bitter battles with modern government and bureaucracy. Aickman tried his hand at running a literary agency, but found it hard to place even his own fictions. His first published book of stories, *We Are For the Dark* (1951) was co-authored with the better-known writer (and his oppressed lover at the time), Elizabeth Jane Howard.

We need Russell's calm

and measured approach to the evidence, as Aickman's two autobiographies are notoriously unreliable and melodramatic. For instance, the first volume, *The Attempted Rescue* (1966), begins with Aickman's own conception, which he claims was his parents' only act of congress in a marriage of otherwise mutual loathing. It makes for an over-tidy account of neurotic Freudian doom.

But Russell does not shy away from the more odious sides of Aickman's personality, either. He had a penchant for intense relationships with young women, whom he often dominated. He was an anti-democrat and true-blue Tory, and occasionally offered a proto-fascist opinion or two. He faked devout Christian belief in his (successful) application to be registered a Conscientious Objector at the start of the Second World War. But his last years, stuck in the Brutalist modernism of a flat in the Barbican housing development in London, have patios. Russell is even-handed and lucid in his assessment of Aickman's life; perhaps wisely, he lets the enigmatic fictions stand for themselves, rather than try to decode them or reduce them to the life.

Fortean will be pleased to know Russell deals with Aickman's lifelong interest in psychical phenomena. Where his ghost stories are ambivalent, Aickman visited Borley Rectory and the Isle of Man in the wake of Harry Price's famous psychical investigations, and was a lifelong member of the Ghost Club. He firmly believed in his own psychical experiences. All in all, this is a compelling read.

Roger Luckhurst

★★★★★

Astrobiology

The Science of Searching for Alien Life: The Illustrated Edition

Andrew May

Icon Books 2023

Hb. 320pp. £20. ISBN 9781785789700

This is the second edition, updated and heavily illustrated, of a work first reviewed with high praise by Mark Greener back in 2019 (FT387:61).

Astrobiology is a detailed investigation of the science involved in identifying the signatures of extraterrestrial life, including the biosignatures from living things and the rather more exciting

techno signatures that reveal the existence of an advanced civilisation.

May gives a thorough rundown of the physics and chemistry involved, from why water is so essential to life as we know it to how we might be able to spot the presence of a Dyson sphere



around a distant star and why one particular radio band has been singled out as the most likely for interstellar communication. He gives a good idea of why human-like aliens are unlikely, and why the odds favour the discovery of single-celled creatures.

Many of the topics, such as the SETI's question for alien signals, the Martian meteorite which may show signs of fossils and the enigmatic 'Oumuamua object which passed through the Solar System, have been covered in these pages. Many others though, especially the more technical, will be new to readers of *FT*. The difficult stuff is very well broken down into digestible chunks though, and greatly assisted by extensive use of helpful diagrams and illustrations.

There are also plenty of pictures which are mainly included for their aesthetic value, in particular gorgeous images from the Hubble and James Webb telescopes as well as snapshots from NASA's many missions to other worlds. These are interspersed with pictures from science fiction sources, notably *Star Trek* and a number of alien contact movies.

Astrobiology is a great introduction to the field and tells you everything you need to know – except perhaps for the answer to the famous Fermi paradox: why, if there are so many aliens out there, we have not seen any sign of them yet.

May gives a good rundown of the possible reasons though, and while he remains generally upbeat about alien contact he does note that being spotted by an alien civilisation might not be an entirely good thing.

If you are reading *FT*, then the chances are you have considered the possibility of life on other worlds. Here is a book which not only explains all the science involved in detail, but also looks good.

David Hambling

★★★★★

The Crew that Never Rests

England's Local Legends of the Fairies

Shudan Cooper

Country Books 2023

Pb, 218pp, £15, ISBN 978-1-73958244-9

Fairies have never gone away, even if, from time to time, they have gone, often literally, underground. The premise of *The Crew That Never Rests* is that most books about British fairies focus on Celtic tales, so English fairies have been overlooked. This book aims to redress the balance. However, almost every page references those Celtic countries, as well as wider Europe; it is truer to say it is more of a comparative study.

Cooper claims to have uncovered more than a dozen previously unarchived legends and his book is filled with snippets, accounts and tales, mostly from Victorian regional newspapers. It is perhaps the sheer number of these painstakingly collected and referenced reports which is the real selling point of this packed little book for the fairy scholar. Some of these both cannily document the fascinating lore whilst also maintaining a sceptical distance; for example, one newspaper refers to fairy belief as "amusing stories told by moorland farmers" or, more scathingly, "asserted by the country folk of Suffolk with all the simplicity of ignorance".

Others charmingly write from the standpoint of believers, such as the *Chichester Observer* of 1930 which noted: "The dewponds are peopled with fairies." In many cases, it seems that the reporters are looking to have their fairy cake and eat it.

Much is covered in a brief whistle-stop style. From fairy behaviour, fairy rings and fairy dancing to fairy connections with witches, with no more than three pages on each, it often resembles a breathless gallop on a pixy-colt. Likewise, many local legends are reduced to a sentence or two: it can feel at times as though we are carried away in a dust cloud along with the fey folk.

This is a book for those curious to explore for themselves – used as a gazetteer, enabling you

to follow your own fairy path, visiting places mentioned, or using the fragments of tales as inspiration for creative writing, illustration or storytelling.

I am reminded of the words of the foremost Irish fairy-lorist and *seanchaí* Eddie Lenahan: "I don't believe in the fairies myself, but they're there all the same."

Olivia Armstrong

★★★★★

Cheating the Ferryman

The Revolutionary Science of Life After Death

Anthony Peake

Archetype 2022

Pb, £9.99, 279pp, ISBN 9781908810917



What happens when we die (or, should I say, when we are about to die)? This perennial question has been relentlessly tackled by Anthony Peake in a series of 11 well-argued books, each examining it in the light of related hypotheses, such as dreaming, precognition, *déjà vu*, clairvoyance, synchronicity and coincidences, new light on consciousness and brain research, the nature of time and the truly baffling nature of quantum phenomena. Although *Cheating the Ferryman* is labelled as a sequel to Peake's well-received *Is There Life After Death?*, it is much more than that: the consolidation of his main theory which suggests we all have an innate chance to "cheat" personal extinction.

His theory includes substantial philosophical and rational arguments in support of some form of reincarnation or continuation of consciousness. His discussion is largely focused upon the psychical experience of near-death and the in-life moments in which we experience *déjà vu*, dreams, synchronicity and out-of-body travels and even encounters with other disembodied intelligences. Along the way, Peake has convincingly argued that our binocular minds include two main types of consciousness which he terms the *Eidolon* (an expendable vehicle for temporal experience) and the *Dæmon* (a more persistent "guardian" element that exists outside of physical time and the source of much psychical awareness).

Subjects such as the nature of our experience of time, out-of-body awareness and the almost mystical consequences of the "observer" effect at the quantum level are difficult to follow – as some readers of Peake's earlier studies declared. In this book, however, by providing more context and many fresh examples, Peake has taken more care with his exposition. Writing clearly is something he does well, making such complex ideas accessible.

He uses the latest research and discoveries in a wide range of sciences and shows precisely why his overall theory provides answers to our important questions, and does so without necessarily compromising modern scientific thinking. I have followed Peake's arguments through all the books, and thoroughly recommend this thought-provoking conclusion. It is a very valuable summary of importance to all of us.

Bob Rickard

★★★★★

Acoustics

The Art of Sound

Steve Marshall

Wander Books, 2022

Pb, 348pp, £9.99, ISBN 978191254317



Apart from a brief reference to the resonant frequencies of prehistoric sites like West Kennet long barrow, and their potential for triggering altered states of consciousness, this isn't a remotely fortéan book, but it is an excellent little primer for anyone interested in learning how sound works. Given its page count, it's amazing just how many facts Marshall manages to cram in. If you've ever wondered exactly what a hertz or a decibel is, or what terms like graphic equaliser and frequency modulation mean, or how ears, loudspeakers,

clarinets or guitar pedals work, this is the book for you. While his main focus is on musical sound, he manages to squeeze in a few other topics too, such as sonic booms, echolocation by bats and dolphins, and the aforementioned prehistoric resonances. The book's gorgeously illustrated, too.

Andrew May

★★★★★



The gods of games

Is the creator of role-playing games really a god? asks **Charles Foster**, as he examines this flawed, misconceived but entertaining guide for deities

How to Be a God

A Guide for Would-be Deities

Richard A Bartle

NonPlus Press, 2023

PB, 6.5pp, £15.20, ISBN 9781801520560

Richard Bartle designs Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMOs). He has been doing it for many years, and is no doubt very good at it. It involves the creation of "pocket universes" or "realities". The architecture and function of the "realities" are wholly controlled by the designer, and the designer, accordingly, is sometimes referred to as a "god".

Since he has actual experience of being such a "god", and making decisions typically made only by gods, Bartle considers that he is a position "to help answer some of the questions that have been bothering students of metaphysics forever", and to identify other unconsidered questions. There's no faulting his ambition, particularly since, as he admits, he is an expert "in neither philosophy nor theology".

The result is this brilliant, infuriating, flawed, highly entertaining and radically misconceived book. Bartle is tremendous company: smart, jaunty, opinionated, polemical and widely read. Go with him on his journey, but don't take him seriously.

Importantly, and staggeringly, when he talks about being a god in relation to the worlds of the games he has created, he is not speaking metaphorically. If there is a God who has created our reality, Bartle considers that the relationship between that God and our reality can be perfectly modelled by his relationship to the games he has created (or at least would be so modelled if AI gave the characters in the games intelligence equal to or greater than our own). Accordingly, since he knows about his relationship to those games, he can draw some confident theological and philosophical conclusions.

He can tell us, for instance, the nature of reality, because he has created some. He can even tell us that there is no God: "For me, knowing what I know about the design of virtual worlds, I can see what would have to follow if Reality were a conscious creation [of a deliberate Creator]. These consequences have not arisen." Simple: that's God sorted. His problem with God is not just the problem of theodicy. He's apparently cracked that too: "even if [our world] were an accidental creation ruled over by an uncaring or capricious god, it would be different to how it is now".

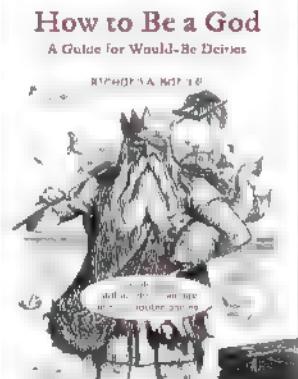
Is it really necessary to explain why this argument is hopeless? It falls at the first hurdle. We can't say much with certainty about the nature of the *real* world (ask a first year philosophy student who has done an epistemology paper),

He seems to see the body as like the hardware of a computer, and what Descartes and others call the "soul" (but which Bartle would doubtless say was the mind, which he would say was the brain) as the software. The idea of some sort of homunculus squatting inside our bodies and controlling us has been comprehensively trashed over the last 300 years. Saying that the homunculus is digital won't help to revive it. We're more or less back to the old Christian understanding of soul-body-spirit unities.

Bartle swaggers in where angels fear to tread, and the book is full of basic misunderstandings. Here's one example. Bartle, talking about the concept of a personal God in Christianity, is clear: "The Father and the Son are definitely personal gods.. ." But that is simply not the classical theist picture of God, in which God is infinitely personal, though *not* a person – not a psychological subject. This is a confusion which Bartle shares with many modern pastiches of Christianity, and one of the reasons why Christianity, as it is often misrepresented, seems ludicrously anthropomorphic and simply too small and parochial to be believable. The New Atheists love the straw man created by the mistake. Bartle should have done better than the benighted Bible-Belters: the distinction matters profoundly to his argument.

It is routinely and often unconsciously assumed that human brains are analogous to computers. The assumption has done untold harm to our view of ourselves. It is rare for someone as computer-savvy as Bartle to try to justify the assumption. His book is important, for it makes the case for the assumption as explicitly as anyone could. That it fails so signally makes it a significant contribution to the literature. For that reason alone it should be widely read.

★★★



and so we can't conclude much at all about how it compares to a product of Bartle's mind.

That said, it seems very improbable that the real world has much in common with even the most advanced digital world. Take us, for instance, for we are part of the real world. Even if, contrary to all our intuitions and an immense amount of evidence, our operating systems are essentially algorithmic, the mysterious fact of embodiment constantly conditions, confounds and overrides the algorithms.

Bartle is reduced to a bizarre pastiche of Cartesian dualism

Kubrickon

The Cult of Kubrick, Attention Capture and the Inception of AI

Jasun Horsley

Aeon 2023

PB, 205pp, £19.99, ISBN 9781801520560

Spoiler Alert – Jasun Horsley does not like Stanley Kubrick! Exactly why, however, remains buried within a repetitive and proliferating invective that becomes increasingly byzantine in its damnation of the man and his movies. He makes it clear that he has only contempt for Kubrick's fans, naming them as dupes prone to "cognitive impairment". Such hyperbole becomes his sole strategy as he dissects Kubrick's "demonic" intent and besmirches his artistic reputation.

Considering *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *The Shining* (1980) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) as his defining canon, Horsley scratches away at their glittering surfaces to excavate a Satanic agency abroad. They are not films, he declares, but "scientific instruments to interact with human consciousness..." and their purpose, "gathering data from the species." A strident claim indeed! By ridiculing the extent to which devotees of Kubrick find historical and biographical correspondences within his films, Horsley places the auteur at the centre of a web of intrigue; the fake Moon landing footage, MKULTRA black ops, weaponised Big Data, and social control programming. A trifle paranoid you may think, and it begs the question as to whether Kubrick held sway over the viewing public outside of arthouse cinemas? Horsley thinks so and makes no bones about it.

But what is the endgame? A foray into Kubrick's interest in cultural manipulation, Artificial Intelligence and the power of Neuro Linguistic Programming fails to convince me that he was working in cahoots with a nebulous power-crazed cabal. However, there is plenty of interesting material, in particular Horsley's biographical diversions, and the sheer delinquent relentlessness of his denunciation has a pathological fascination.

Chris Hill

★★★

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Return to Green Street

It's time for another small screen retelling of the famous Enfield Poltergeist case, but this one has a few new tricks up its sleeve and remains refreshingly fortean in its open-minded approach



The Enfield Poltergeist

Dir Jerry Rothwell, UK 2023
Streaming on Apple TV+

An incident familiar to readers of *Fortean Times* – the goings on at 284 Green Street, Enfield, between 1977 and 1979 – have been documented, dramatised and regurgitated many times over the intervening decades, in recent years, most notably, in Sky's three-part series *The Enfield Haunting* (2015). The case of an alleged poltergeist/demonic possession in a London suburb has been hard to resist, even for film-makers outside the UK: 2016 saw *The Conjuring 2* tackle the subject, albeit with a shaky grasp of the details and much invention. Now, Apple+ reckon it's time for another crack at it.

To give the series its due, the makers have hit upon a method of relating the story in a fresh and unusual manner. The twist here is that the dramatisations of certain scenes feature the actual audio recordings made at the time by Maurice Grosse, the

The film includes many interviews with the actual witnesses

man who was chiefly responsible for investigating the case. That is to say, when the cast are acting out scenes you don't hear them voicing their own lines; rather they are lip-synching to those audio tapes. The intention no doubt is to remove any concern that the film-makers are inventing dialogue or overdoing the noises the 'poltergeist' made. They really are striving for as much accuracy as they can, which is commendable.

The film also includes many interviews with the actual witnesses, those whose voices we hear coming out of the actors' mouths. It's something of a belt-and-braces approach in that one sees a dramatic scene featuring an actor playing a real-life person (using a recording

of that person's voice) and then immediately watches an interview clip featuring that person. It took me a few minutes to adjust to this approach, but it really works.

There are four episodes of roughly 50 minutes each. The first, naturally enough, outlines the case and introduces the individuals involved. It also sets up what appears to have been a frosty relationship between Grosse and his fellow members of the Society for Psychical Research. Grosse was convinced, the SPR on the whole were not. It has to be said that those who either witnessed the events in Enfield, or spent many hours investigating those events, were almost entirely convinced. Those who didn't spend much time there, or none at all, were highly sceptical.

Subsequent episodes concern developments in the case itself and the growing suspicion that there might be less to the story than meets the eye. What one might call the highlights of the case are dramatised and

discussed: the spoon bending; the voice of an unquiet spirit, 'Bill'; the visit of American paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren (you know, Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga); the brief visit by British ventriloquist Ray Alan (you know, Lord Charles); and evidence that some of the phenomena may have been fabricated.

When the series starts to focus on Janet Hodgson – the 11-year-old girl at the centre of the case – it becomes clear that she was a troubled child. This is where the trump card is played, in the form of interviews with Janet today, a middle-aged woman. The repercussions of the claims, the investigation, and the media intrusion have clearly taken their toll. Apparently her mother was desperate to get her out of the house to minimise the disruptive effect on Janet's two siblings (and Mum herself). In what seems like pitiless treatment now, Janet is separated from her family.

To its credit, the series doesn't encourage you to think one way or another regarding whether the poltergeist activity was real or the wild imaginings of a clever but needy child. It hedges its bets by showing that the dramatic reconstructions are an artifice (the opening credits of each episode show the interior sets of the Hodgson's home being painstakingly assembled) and yet stressing the truth of the audio recordings. In the final episode, Janet and her sister Margaret visit the sets, and for Janet at least it brings back painful memories. She talks about how she only lives half a life and clearly hasn't been able to process what happened or why. Regardless of whether you think there was a poltergeist in Enfield, Janet even now is clearly haunted by something.

Daniel King

★★★★

Asteroid City

Dir Wes Anderson, US 2023
Blu-ray (£14.99), DVD (£9.99) and
digital platforms

Much like the original *Twilight Zone* science fiction TV series being introduced by Rod Serling, *Asteroid City* is introduced by a neatly suited man in a 1950s TV studio, the sequence filmed in black and white.

We are shown legendary playwright Conrad Earg (Edward Norton) typing away as he creates his new production, "Asteroid City". In a sharp contrast with the opening scene, we then see Augie Steenback (Jason Schwartzman) and his son and three young daughters arrive at this fictional city in vivid saturated colour.

The desert settlement boasts a population of 87 and consists of an observatory, motel, diner and garage set on the California/Nevada border next to an asteroid crater and a railway line that transects the highway.

The city is portrayed as a brightly illuminated cartoon that includes a small cameo for the *Road Runner* character straight out of the Looney Tunes cartoon series, who always outwitted Wile E. Coyote's attempts at capturing him. Another cartoonish feature is the amusing running gag of a gun battle between a police car and the gangster's vehicle it is chasing; the police, like Wile E. Coyote, seem destined to be tricked and outrun at every turn. And when Augie's own car breaks down in the city, parts of it take on a cartoonish life of their own. Another sign that human endeavour is prone to failure is the city's unfinished road ramp that leads to nowhere, that can serve as an existential metaphor for our own existence on this planet.

Woodrow (Jake Ryan), Augie's shy, intellectual and nerdy son is involved in a student Stargazer/Space Cadet science competition being held in the city to celebrate innovative new technology.

As well as the gadgets made by the young competitors, we see the mushroom clouds of atomic bombs being tested in the background, showing that technology and science have the potential to wipe us all out as well as to aid our continued survival. And all this is mixed with the paranoia of the US military when they fear an alien invasion from outer space is going to take place at the site of the 5,000 year-old asteroid crater.

Augie, a war photojournalist, who always has a camera hanging from his neck, is still grieving for his recently deceased wife and his life, like Asteroid City itself, is at a crossroads. Meanwhile, his three daughters play with magic spells like a band of witches, and try to revive the ashes of their dead mother, which are kept in a Tupperware container. The actress who is meant to play their mother (Margot Robbie) does appear in a flashback scene about the play, but this is deleted from the final project.

Director Wes Anderson mixes the behind-the-scenes creation of *Asteroid City* with the film/play itself, highlighting the artifice of filmmaking, using his trademark skill of employing deliberate camera movement and precise framing of scenes and characters, a style that serves to detach the viewer rather than providing an unthinking involvement in the story.

The mantra near the end of the film – "You can't wake up if you don't fall asleep" – underlines the point made by the movie itself: that we live in and perceive different multi-layered realities that range from pure fantasy to the harsh reality of physical existence. As with the citizens of *Asteroid City*, who shrug their shoulders on seeing an atomic bomb mushroom cloud and say 'Another atom bomb test', life goes on despite war, death and cosmic encounters.

Nigel Watson

★★★★

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

I've taken the liberty of organising your festive film itinerary. It reads thus...

You'll start on Christmas Eve with *Werewolf Santa* (DVD, £14.99) in which Father Christmas gets attacked by a wolf while delivering presents, turns lupine, then rips the guts out of local doggers mid-contest. The not-so-jolly beast must be stopped... but will anyone dare destroy the central cog of Christmas? This low-budget British flick looks (and feels) like a Channel 4 comedy sketch, but that's no bad thing. It's silly and funny, with decent performances.

On Christmas morn, you might head off to church... so best wait till you get back before watching *The Rev*, (digital platforms) an icky

true crime doc about a mild-mannered Welsh clergyman. He was arrested in 1985 for hacking the penises off funeral corpses and taking pics. It's a well-made, pensive and often disturbing story. If that's got you in the mood for pigs in blankets, eat your dinner now.

After the food, you can watch the Christmas speech from King Charles. But an alternative moral message can be found in *SAW X* (digital platforms). Yes, serial killing pensioner Jigsaw is back to teach baddies a lesson – by forcing them to razor wire their legs off and sucking their bone marrow into a weighing machine. Maybe Charles should try this on-air next year! Tobin Bell's touching performance makes this a weirdly inspirational, if

I've taken the liberty of organising your festive film itinerary

convoluted and depraved, soap opera

Follow the speech with chocolate... though your Terry's Chocolate Orange might look a bit different this year – it's the Lament Configuration Box from *Hellraiser*, which just hit 4K UHD in a loaded four-disc set (Arrow Video, £59.99). Clive Barker's original feels as beautifully corrupt as ever, and the sequel retains a similar scary, theological depth. After that, though, the films become too commercial and mainstream. *Empire* magazine praised Part 3 at the time for ditching the 'waffling metaphysics' of the earlier films. Ironically, that's the stuff that most *Hellraiser* fans missed.

After a coco-bite of chocolate (ho ho!) you'll want some light-hearted variety. So, pour a brandy for *Give Me Pity*, (in cinemas and on demand) a faux, 80s-style TV special. This arthouse one-woman show is an astonishing showcase for Sophie Van Haselberg (Bette Midler's daughter). She dazzles and disturbs as the show's soft-focus star, craving fame... yet slipping into total, psychedelic madness – live!

It wouldn't be Crimbo without gathering the family around the TV for the big movie. So how about Lucio Fulci's Gates of Hell shocker, *The House by the Cemetery*? This Frankenstein-inspired story of a New England murder house is steeped with atmosphere, gorgeous shots and a groovy score. It's a tad more restrained than other Fulci films, but you'll still see scissors hammered through heads and multiple spurting throats in 4K (Arrow Video, £24.99). A fine way to end a festive day!

THE HAUNTED GENERATION

BOB FISCHER ROUNDS UP THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE PARALLEL WORLDS OF POPULAR HAUNTOLOGY

"I was a little late seeing *The Stone Tape* for the first time," admits Rob Glover. "It was something myself and a close knit group of friends had read about online, mentioned in whispers on Internet forums. We had to hunt it down..."

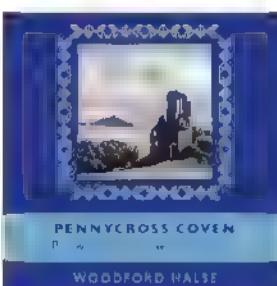
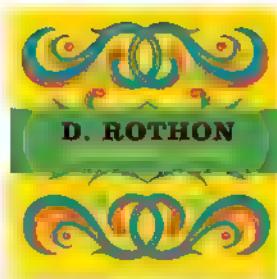
Safe to say he's caught up now. Inspired by the 50th anniversary of Nigel Kneale's still-disturbing 1972 TV play, Rob has launched a spanking new record label – *Hidden Britain Tapes* – by commissioning an impressive compilation album, the evocatively-titled *Analysing A Ghost By Electronic Means*. Here, the likes of Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan, The Night Monitor and The Soulless Party contribute an eclectic array of original electronic music, all influenced by the brickwork-based hauntings that once got Jane Asher in such a terrible tizz.

"It was the blending of the technological and the supernatural that really floored me," says Rob. "It lingered long after the chilling climax." The album is available from hiddenbritain.bandcamp.com.

Up in North-east England, it seems, similarly hair-raising psychic echoes abound. Here, Dr Peter Falconer has been profoundly affected by the lingering traces of a coastal community that – he claims – vanished in curious circumstances.

"Even amongst the people of Hartlepool, there was a bit of distrust about Seaton Snook," he says. "There were rumours of strange moonlight rituals and supernatural goings on. When I did a bit of digging, I realised I'd played on those same sand dunes as a child without realising that there had once been a thriving community there. I always felt I could still hear the voices of this forgotten town, drifting over the sound of the waves..."

Peter's explorations paddle mischievously through the shallow waters separating fact from fiction. Did Mrs Agatha Pilkington really use her



LONDON'S DESERTED VILLAGE: THE RUINED STREET OF "LONESOME"

Grundig Stenorette dictaphone to record the aftermath of an appalling incident at the local Zinc Works?

Did 19th century bigamist John 'Timion Of The Tees' Wills reinvent himself as

rural occultist 'Black Willie'? And what about the book of Northumbrian smallpipe tunes collated by amateur actor and pirate radio pioneer Robson Booth?

The answer to this latter

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: D. Rothon's *Lonesome Echoes*; a new compilation inspired by *The Stone Tape*; Vic Mars's *The Beacons*; Woodford Halse's *Pennycross Coven*; the ruined streets of Lonesome; Dr Peter Falconer's *The Seaton Snook Smallpipes Tunes*; Portland Vows' *The Witches of Hopwas Wood*

question, at least, is relatively straightforward. Peter – an accomplished smallpipe-player himself – has recorded them for posterity on his pragmatically-named new album, *The Seaton Snook Smallpipes Tunes*. The album is beautifully played, and the whole project is an extraordinary feat of either meticulous research or fevered invention... or, more likely, a bit of both. Head to seatonsnook.com, and be sure to take your wellies.

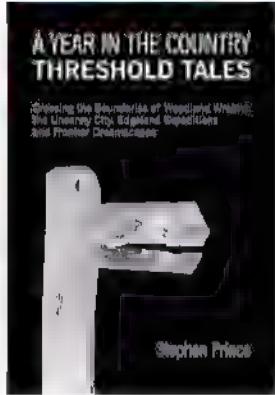
Equally fascinated by the urban vanished is D Rothon, whose new release *Lonesome Echoes* is not – as you might expect – a lament for all things solitary. Rather, it's a musical homage to a short-lived south London village with a curious name: Lonesome. Once located amid the 19th century swamplands between Streatham Vale and Mitcham Common, this tiny community lasted barely 100 years before its downfall was precipitated by "a rough reputation and the combined fragrances of piggeries and chemical factories". This beautiful EP is a woozy, melancholy collection for mellotron and pedal steel guitar and is available from claypipemusic.co.uk.

And, while you're there, maybe check out *The Beacons*. A stunning new album by Vic Mars, it takes an atmospheric ramble around the unforgiving landscapes and strange folklore of the Welsh mountains. Listeners particularly keen to dally with the Fae should head directly to 'Cwm Llwch'. According to local legend, this small Powys lake is the home of an invisible island populated by the Tylwyth Teg fairies,

and – on May Day every year – a mystical doorway appears on the shoreline, whisking curious visitors through a secret tunnel to the island's enchanted garden. Vic evokes this curious tale with lilting guitars and shimmering synths, but elsewhere there are darker tones: 'The Obelisk' marks the tragic 1900 fate of Tommy Jones, a wandering infant whose body was inexplicably found 686m (2,250ft) above sea level after a tip-off from a local woman who claimed to have foreseen this remote location in a dream.

Meanwhile, Bob Plant – recording in his guise as Portland Vows – has been revisiting curious incidents from his Staffordshire childhood. *The Witches Of Hopwas Woods* is a charming record inspired by a 1984 news report (in the *Tamworth Herald*, fact fans) about the arrest of a coven of local witches, found dancing naked in this beloved local beauty spot. "It prompted me and a few friends to visit the woods a couple of days later," recalls Bob. "We found remnants of fires and what looked to us like occult symbols fashioned from branches, twigs and grass." The album is available from hurdkindrecords.bandcamp.com. Feeling similarly ceremonial, Steve Netting has summoned up *Between Shadows And Lore*, a splendidly melodic homage to the esoteric practices of his native Devonshire. Steve has previously recorded as Town and County, but – for this project – has adopted Pennycross Coven as his moniker of choice, and tracks like 'Casting The Circle' and 'Cone Of Power' suggest an intimate familiarity with the Wiccan traditions of Plymouth. And, indeed, the 1980s soundtracks of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. It's available from woodfordhaisle.bandcamp.com.

Speaking of the inestimable Workshop, this month saw the release of an extraordinary collection from one of its most notable luminaries. Throughout 1963 and 1964, Delia Derbyshire collaborated with playwright Barry Bermange on 'Inventions For Radio', a series of four longform sound collages for the BBC's *Third Programme*. Keen to canvas the thoughts of everyday punters on matters metaphysical, Bermange decamped to Hornsey Old



People's Welfare Council and asked its users to recount memories of their latest dreams, their relationships with God and the numerous drawbacks of their encroaching mortality. 'Dreams' in particular forms a disturbing narrative: one of malevolent beasties, bottomless voids, alien planets and the fragmented memories of wartime bereavement. Its most heartbreak moment? The woman who finds her deceased little brother deep underwater, still showing twitching signs of life. "I must tell my mother..."

Derbyshire assembles a hugely affecting backdrop of throbbing drones and manipulated choral sounds, segueing effortlessly from melancholic disquiet to ecclesiastic rapture, and the whole collection is available from silvascreen.com. I also recommend *Future Perfect*, a collection of unreleased private recordings from the woman Delia considered her spiritual heir. Elizabeth Parker joined the Radiophonic Workshop in 1978, creating music and sound effects for *Doctor Who*, *Blake's 7* and *Day of the Triffids*. But, in her own time, she was amassing

steeped in anxious beauty, available from gazelletwin.bandcamp.com.

On a lighter note, anyone remember the 1970s film output of (Associated) British Ligocuss? No? Not surprising really, but that hasn't stopped Stephen Stannard of The Rowan Amber Mill launching a multi-media tribute to this underappreciated producer of low-budget horror flicks. Debut single 'Ghosts On Mopeds' is the splendidly proggy 1976 title song that once soundtracked a spectral scooter gang's one-way mission down the A303, and it's included on a folk-tinged compilation, *The Haunted Future Silence Bequeathed*. Further releases are promised from rowanambermill.bandcamp.com.

Meanwhile, Folk Horror fans might be similarly interested in a real-life contemporary film from director Graham Vasey. *The Black Tor* is a haunting, five-minute tale of ritual menace set amid the isolated moorland of Teesdale. Shot on authentic monochrome 16mm film stock, and hand-processed by Graham himself, it boasts an air of suitably analogue dread. If you're looking to work off a few festive over-indulgences, take a steep climb up to youtube.com/@GrahamVasey81.

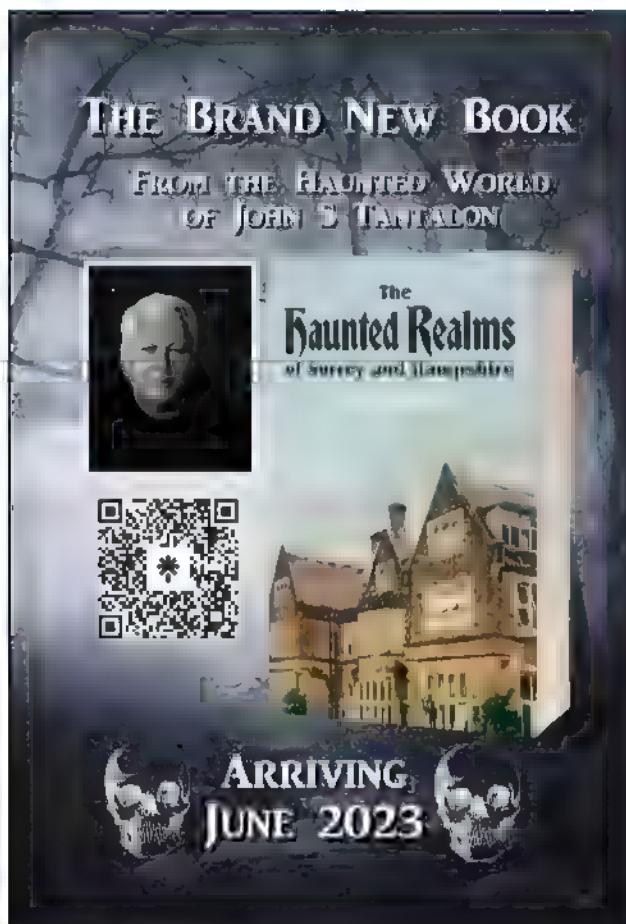
But, if you prefer your merry-making to be a little more sedentary, I recommend curling up with a wonderful brace of books by Stephen Prince. For almost a decade, Stephen has been exploring all manner of rural strangeness through his constantly evolving project, *A Year In The Country*. He has a virtually unparalleled enthusiasm for TV, film and music from the more overgrown corners of the pastoral realm, and this passion is evident in both *Lost Transmissions* and *Threshold Tales*. The books – available from ayearinthecountry.co.uk – follow the "brambled pathways" from Ghost Box Records to Alan Garner, from the "spectral hip-hop" of Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog* to the darker side of Disney's 1980s output. In short, they're the perfect accompaniment to a glass of brandy, a slice of fruit cake and whichever arcane ritual makes you happiest during these dark, sepulchral, winter evenings. Happy Christmas, everyone.

**One God but many Religions.
WHY?**

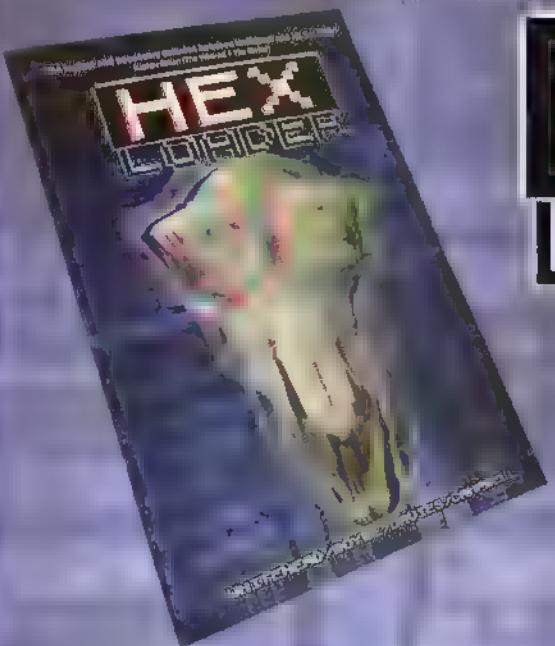


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Sex Pistols trial

In an instance of synchronicity may I alert you to my radio play *Never Mind The Ballocks* which is a dramatisation of the 1977 Sex Pistols trial in Nottingham as mentioned in Classical Corner [FT437:13] and is due to be broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in January 2024. The manager of the Virgin Record store (Christopher Seale – not Seals) was charged under the Obscene Act to Suppress Indecent Advertisements of 1889, which was originally drafted to prosecute purveyors of dubious cures for VD: 'Any such advertisement relating to syphilis, gonorrhoea, nervous debility, or other complaint or infirmity arising from or relating to sexual intercourse, if it is affixed to or inscribed on any public urinal shall be deemed to be within the meaning of this Act.' The Head of English Studies at Nottingham University (Professor James Kingsley – not Kingsley) was an expert in 'the history and development of the English language in the early Middle Ages as evidenced in the minor works of Geoffrey Chaucer', which made him an ideal witness for the defence. His testimony concluded with a reference to 'bollocks' or 'ballocks' as a slang term for a clergyman – he should know as he was an ordained priest in the Church of England. The doubtless perplexed Nottingham magistrates dismissed the charge 'reluctantly'.
Michael Eaton
Nottingham

Missed opportunity

In 1989, I was interviewed by the local newspaper, *Halifax Courier*, about my research for a book about Yorkshire ghostlore, (though it would be another 10 years before I had one published), and I was contacted by various readers with their own paranormal experiences.

One of them was a phone call from a gentleman (let's call him Mr Booth) who told me that he and his wife lived in a former dairy on a lane called Old Bank, in the village of Ripponden not far from Halifax, and that every morning, at the same time, they would see the ghost/spirit of a woman

SIMULACRA CORNER



The cover of Bob Osborne's wonderful book *Zenmor - Spirit of Place* looks like a grinning man with an elongated head whispering a secret to the Sphinx. The book is published by The St Ives Printing and Publishing Company, ISBN 978-1-8998083-0-9. Thanks to Charlotte Lloyd for sending this in.

Send pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your post address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH, Sieveking@forteantimes.com

walk through the kitchen, go outside into the garden, crouch down in the vegetable patch – and then vanish

I thought: this could be it! A ghostly replay kind of haunting which appeared not once a month, or once a year, but every morning, every single day, at exactly the same time! I could arrange to visit, and be there on the spot, right on time with my camera, and get it on film.

I don't know why I waited approximately two weeks to

get back in touch with Mr Booth, but a lady, who identified herself as Mrs Booth, answered the call, and when I asked to speak to Mr Booth, she informed me that her husband had since passed away and, as I didn't want to bother her with my enquiries at that sad time, I thanked her and ended the call. I always meant to phone back and ask to arrange a visit, but I never got round to it.

If the call was genuine, and I have no reason to suspect that it wasn't, this could have proved in-

valuable experience and possibly conclusive proof.

I decided that if I was ever contacted by someone with a similar claim, then I would act upon it immediately. So far, it's never happened!

• It sounds like a scene from the film *Jumanji*, but in one of my favourite fortean books – *Modern Mysteries of Britain* (Grafton, 1987) by Janet and Colin Bord – in the county-by-county gazetteer, there are several reports of monkeys being seen in Lincolnshire and Leicestershire. In August 1976, in the Blyton/Northorpe areas of Lincolnshire, there were three reported sightings of a two-foot (60cm) tall monkey. Fast forward to September 1979, in the Stamford area of Lincolnshire, monkeys were seen swinging through the trees. And in the same month in the Exton district of Leicestershire, several monkeys were seen to be raiding dustbins and greenhouses (pp.283-284).

Were the sightings ever explained, I wonder?

Andy Owens
Halifax, West Yorkshire

Confusing gulls

As a keen birder I have seen many objects similar in appearance to that depicted in UFO Showtime [FT435:29]. On examination with a spotting 'scope they all prove to be high flying seagulls, usually herring gulls. These sightings are on sunny days with blue skies, often in the morning or afternoon but also at other times of day if the land surface below the bird is brightly lit by the Sun. These birds often rise on a thermal to great heights then glide, without flapping, on a descending path for many miles, usually when commuting to and from coastal sites far inland. Because of their white underparts, their appearance is that of a bright silver dot moving steadily across the sky in a direct line, not unlike aeroplanes under such conditions, but with no contrail and appearing smaller, slower and steadier, and are often unresolvable without a spotting 'scope due to their great height.

Will Palmer
Gravesend, Kent

LETTERS



Cricketing Coincidences

While listening to the perennially entertaining Test Match Special team for the finale of The Ashes cricket yesterday (31 July 2023) a wonderful statistical oddity was shared. Alec Stewart, former England wicketkeeper-batsman, was born on 8 April 1963 (8/4/63) and finished his Test career with a runs tally of 8,463. Remarkable.

Inspired to browse further, I came across another nice piece of symmetry on [wisden.com](https://www.wisden.com). On 11 November 2011, South Africa played the third day of the 1st Test against Australia. At 11.11am the score was precisely 125 for 1 as South Africa chased a target of 236 to win. Therefore on 11.11.11 at 11.11am they required another 111 for victory. (Image above: Scoreboard showing time, date and SA total of 125/1. Source: [wisden.com](https://www.wisden.com))

(For the record, they achieved this for the loss of 2 wickets. No batsman scored 111, unfortunately, although Graeme Smith did end up with 101 and Hashim Amla 112. So very close!).

Duncan Kaiser

By email

Comments on FT435

Like Michael Holt [erratum FT435:2], I too am retired and have lots of spare time. His observation of Hitler's overcoat incorrectly shown as buttoning on the wrong side prompted me to address the issue of men's and women's buttons being on different sides. I consider it a plausible theory that the origin of men's buttons being on the right, so that the garment overlaps left to right, is in plates of armour. To quote a 1975 exhibition catalogue from

the US Metropolitan Museum of Art titled *The Art of Chivalry: European Arms and Armor*: "To ensure that an enemy's lance point would not slip between the plates, they overlapped from left to right, since it was standard fighting practice that the left side, protected by the shield, was turned toward the enemy. Thus, men's jackets button left to right even to the present day."

There is a theory, which I believe is widely held, that women's clothes button up the other way round because, many years ago, women who could afford clothes with buttons had servants to dress them, and it made it easier for the servants. I think the reason is more nuanced than that. Firstly, with no disrespect to the Victorians in this regard, I don't think they would have adapted their fashions for the convenience of servants. Secondly, although I have spent my whole life buttoning my garments "the men's way", and would probably find it a bit unnatural to try buttoning a garment the other way round, no woman I have spoken to has any difficulty whatsoever in buttoning their clothes. I think the fashion most likely arose as a way of saying "Look at me. My buttons are the wrong way round because I'm a lady and I don't have to dress myself."

• Regarding the appropriately circumspect article 'This Year's Ripper' [FT435:4], I think Bax Horton's theory is rather shaky. Although I am also speculating here, I would have thought that a man with only one functioning arm, mobility issues and severe epilepsy would be an unlikely candidate for the title character. Although Hyams was apparently subject to violent rages,

my understanding of the condition of the victims attributed to the Ripper suggests savage but controlled behaviour. In addition, Bax Horton's claim that he knew how to use a knife could apply to anyone who has ever chopped vegetables, and does not imply that he would be able to "butcher" human beings.

• Regarding the Holy Holes? (p.12), as their location relates to former streams, my first thought was that they could be related to fish farming or storage. Perhaps when fish were plentiful, they were caught en masse, and placed in the man-made ponds.

• The Detective Dodd section of UFO Files (p.28) doesn't ring true. Firstly, why would it be easier for a friend to go to London, pick up the package and deliver it to Dodd than for Dodd to collect it himself? Regardless of where the friend lived, it would be a long round trip for either of them, and Dodd was the one who wanted it. Secondly, if the friend was involved in a car chase, how did he have time to address the package, get it weighed, stamped, paid for and posted? He must be one hell of a driver.

• As regards 'The Incorrputibles' (pp.44-47), I would suggest that unusual preservation is not just the province of the "great and the good". I think it is just a case of these individuals being disinterred more frequently than people like you and me. (Yes, I know there's a potential joke there.) In addition, as the article states, artificial means are sometimes employed to keep the holy deceased looking lifelike.

• Having lived in East Africa for part of my childhood, I found *Weirdness out of Africa* (pp.54-55) quite interesting. Regarding the tales of people about four feet (122cm) tall, I think this could well be a memory of ancient pygmy populations, which are believed to have lived throughout West Africa. Modern pygmy people can be under 4ft 6in (137cm). Regarding the breath-holding fishermen, it is conceivable that some groups of people can hold their breath for

an implausible length of time. Various reports indicate that the South East Asian Bajau Sea Nomads can stay under water for 13 minutes, but 45 minutes seems excessive.

Dave Miles

By email

Major Discrepancies

To respond to Geoff Clifton's latest letter [FT436:64] about our differing opinions [FT432:63] regarding Major Jesse Marcel: I suspect we're both just going to go on disagreeing! To address his newest specific points:

You'd assume Major Marcel would indeed have been familiar with an ordinary weather-balloon: but the one supposed to have crashed at Roswell was a new classified one, with special technology on-board to detect atmospheric evidence of Soviet nuclear tests. He could well have been confused by what certain parts of it were at the time. It was only later Marcel said he was promoted to work on the Mogul project, was it not? Mac Brazel, who first located the wreckage, had found downed weather-balloons on his ranch before, but everred the 1947 detritus did "not in any way" resemble these; but it didn't resemble a spaceship either, as it was partly made from "rubber strips, tinfoil, a rather rough paper and sticks" plus "considerable Scotch tape and some tape with flowers printed upon it."

As regards Brigadier General Roger Ramey substituting the real balloon with an ordinary one in photos, hence explaining the torn tinfoil: maybe he did, although captions in the UFO books I own never point this out. Was this alleged substitution known to have happened from provable sources at the time, or is this just something Marcel claimed years afterward, late in life, when being interviewed by UFO investigators for the 1980s Roswell book which re-launched the case in the public mind? Alternatively, if a top-secret advanced balloon did crash at Roswell, it would make sense this would be substituted with a more ordinary one in press photos, to avoid letting the Russians see what tech the US had. I find

either option more likely than it being a crashed ET spacecraft.

Concerning Marcel's exaggerations of his war record: according to sceptic Robert Todd, who unearthed them, they were actually quite major. He claimed to have shot down five enemy planes, but wasn't even a gunner; his role was passenger-based, acting as an intelligence observer. Far from having a degree in physics, as he boasted, he had no degree at all. He said he had written President Truman's radio address announcing Russia had made its own A-bomb: but Truman never even made such a wireless speech. There is no evidence of him being shot down in combat, as he said, either. According to Todd, it was even unlikely he had any actual direct experience of weather-balloon. But I presume (Mr Clifton can correct me here) Marcel only made these claims late in life, not in the 1940s/50s, so such untruths would have had no bearing upon his later military promotion.

But, I'm no expert on Roswell or Major Marcel, and I admit to getting all this from secondary sources. Both Marcel and Roswell are barely even mentioned in my *Nazi UFOs* book, where they are mentioned, it is only as a brief backdrop to the way the Roswell UFO Museum displays exceedingly dubious 'Nazi Foo-Fighter' models, and to a ridiculous story to the effect that the Roswell saucer was actually a creation of Stalin, who enlisted Nazi death-camp doctor Josef Mengele to fill it with surgically mutilated dwarf-children, in order to cause mass panic across Cold War America by convincing its public aliens had landed. I just take the standard 'weather balloon' narrative for granted so I can quickly move onto talking about these specific *Nazi*-related untruths about Roswell – Nazis being what my book is actually about, not Roswell. So, I don't think there's much more I can add to all this now!

SD Tucker

Widnes, Cheshire

Geoff Clifton responds:

As hardly anyone living now has first-hand knowledge of



the Roswell incident or indeed of Jesse Marcel (even his son is dead), then both Mr Tucker and I are entirely dependent on second hand sources. Mine are principally the writings of Stanton Friedman (who interviewed Marcel), William Moore, Tom Carey, Don Schmitt and Kevin Randle, plus Jesse Marcel Junior's own book on Roswell. Naturally Jesse Jr defended his dad, but he was a medical doctor and an army colonel, which must count for something.

My understanding is that the Mogul balloon was very similar in appearance to a normal weather balloon, apart from the addition of some relatively small items of equipment (microphones, seismic detectors etc). Marcel should not have been thrown by what were minor differences. And yes, he was familiar with weather balloons. Walter Haut, the base press officer, confirmed this in a 1993 affidavit. And Marcel spoke to Friedman about the Roswell crash after he had worked on the Mogul project, and so should have been able to correct any earlier misapprehension by then, should that have been necessary.

Marcel himself suggested that a switch of debris had been made at General Ramey's press conference, when he was interviewed in 1979. Jesse Jr and others, who were acquainted with Mac Brazel, gave consistent stories of having seen a type of 'memory metal' (a tin foil like material that returned to its pristine state even after having been crumpled up), which was found at the crash site. Nothing like that exists even today. Brazel himself was believed to have been 'got at' by the authorities and possibly even bought off. He was seen driving a brand-new truck not long after having been questioned.

As for Marcel's war record, I would first say that it makes

perfect sense for sceptics to try to discredit him as his testimony is arguably the most persuasive of all those who suggested that a flying saucer had crashed at Roswell. My understanding is that Marcel served in the Pacific theatre and received combat medals, including the Bronze Star, which was a prestigious gallantry award, together with official commendations. That alone is a verifiable and meritorious record and I can't say why he would have wanted to 'improve' on it, assuming that he did. I accept that lying about a physics degree is a cause for concern, but Marcel did attend university and was qualified in other subjects.

He was likely a crew member in planes that shot down or did damage to enemy aircraft, even though he was not the pilot or gunner. So, it may be a stretch, but not entirely inaccurate to say what he apparently did. And I'm afraid that I can't get too worked up about the Truman speech imputation. As a relatively junior civil servant, I prepared the first draft of speeches for important people, that then passed through several other hands and which, in some cases were never delivered. If that's the best the sceptics can do, then one can start to hear the bottom of barrels being scraped. As I say, it is in the interests of the debunkers to destroy Marcel's reputation.

But Major Marcel held a very responsible position in the US Air Force, which operated a rigorous internal inspection system at that time. Had he been the fantasist that Mr Tucker believes, then it is unlikely that he would have had the long and distinguished career that he did.

And finally, other former Roswell airmen have backed Marcel's claims, notably Walter Haut, (mentioned above), and there have also been several death-bed declarations corroborating his account.

Postscript: I have looked a little further into the allegations of Marcel's dishonesty (and I believe that most of them are the result of Kal Korff's research) and would say in response to Mr Tucker that they mainly seem to stem

from what Marcel apparently claimed in various interviews given in the late 1970s. I feel it is difficult now to get to the truth of the matter, and much of what is alleged could qualify as hearsay. I am not sure if Marcel made these claims on film but suspect that if he had, Korff would have had a field day. As it is, he makes a big deal about Marcel saying that he flew the wreckage to Fort Worth, despite not being a pilot. I suspect, however, that this was a figure of speech in so far as Marcel was probably the senior officer on the plane. Nevertheless, if some of these claims are true, then I do acknowledge that they significantly weaken my case. However, I do feel that Korff's best evidence is that Marcel's own military record describes him as being prone to exaggerate. Now that could be seen as very subjective, as many of us can be so prone, to some extent or another; but Korff admitted that he could find no evidence of Marcel lying while he was still in the military. For instance, on his service record, Marcel stated that he had no college degree, physics or otherwise.

I guess, ultimately, that I am basing my opinion of Marcel on what I have read about him in dozens of books and articles and have to admit that my 'take' on the Roswell incident does depend to a large degree on his good character – just as the sceptics' case very much rests on his supposed failings.

Geoff Clifton

By email

This correspondence is now closed



What Happened to Me...



Creepy critters

I met my current partner Nicky in early 2021 and we moved to a house in Watten, in the far north Highlands, later that same year. We really bonded and have many mutual interests. One day, I was manically singing a line from Ian Dury's "Hit Me with Your Rhythm Stick", then turned on the radio to find it playing – not the second or third song in but it was immediately on. It was as if I'd picked up the transmission in my head and there it was playing.

Anyway, the story isn't really about that but perhaps it helps show that a strong human relationship may manifest unusual occurrences.

Not long after (autumn 2021), we were lying in bed reading when we saw a spider on the opposite side of the ceiling and I said to Nicky: "Imagine if he walks around and settles above our heads!" Guess what? The spider did just that. Weirder was to come though, and after sitting above our heads, about 8ft or 9ft [2.4–2.7m] up, it dropped down between our heads on the pillows. After a quick "Wow!", I carefully removed the spider and got it away safely as we don't like killing creatures.

If that wasn't strange enough, just a couple of weeks later or so there was an isopod (woodlouse) on the ceiling but on a different area from the spider. I said to Nicky: "I know it will never happen but imagine if he does the same as the spider" The little creature hadn't actually moved



"I got the feeling it was an old woman standing on the bottom step"

and was at the opposite end of the ceiling quite a distance away. By the way, we'd actually watched some YouTube videos about these creatures around the same time and found out that they are not insects but soil-dwelling crustaceans.

We pretty much forgot about the wee chap and turned out the light. A few minutes later, Nicky gave out a shriek. The isopod had gone around the ceiling and fallen down from right above us and it hit Nicky on the lip. It was carefully sent on its way outside like the spider.

What are the chances of something like that happening once, let alone twice? I work as a journalist and have heard all sorts of local tales of ghosts and suchlike. There's usually a rational explanation but I just can't think how something like this could happen and not just once. Could the creatures be picking up a scent from us or perhaps our



breathing? It's truly baffling.

Our place dates from the early 1800s and has been named Thor House for many years – I have no idea why but perhaps the God of Thunder is playing funny tricks on us!

David Graham Scott
Watten, Highland, Scotland

The boy in the red anorak

In June 2015 I spoke to Stan Pitt, an old friend, regarding a recurring apparition he had seen in his Victorian home in St Andrews Road, Southsea. His first experience occurred around five weeks prior to my speaking to him, which dates it to late April 2015. While recovering from a hip operation and unable to get around without the use of crutches or a wheelchair, Stan was spending more time at home than he would have liked

One evening his flatmate Jamie had gone out and Stan was reclining on the settee watching television. At around 1am the film he was watching was interrupted by an advertisement break. The room was illuminated by a lamp which afforded a soft light. A bright red something caught his attention from the corner of his eye. He turned towards the window bay and saw a figure standing in front of the window facing into the room. The lower part of its body was hidden by a settee positioned there. He was initially unsure whether the figure was male or female, as it was wearing a bright red anorak with the hood up. However, he later noticed an Adam's apple, so now thinks it was male.

It gazed across the room, seemingly unaware of Stan and never looking in his direction. In fact, the figure appeared completely static, with no facial or bodily movement whatsoever. The features indicated a teenager, and Stan noted blue eyes in a pale face, which he interpreted as having a 'lost' look. The figure was quite tall, about 6ft [1.8m]. After a minute or so it began to disappear. It gradually started to "go out of focus" until no longer visible.

From the moment he saw the figure, the hairs on the back of his neck bristled.

About a week later the figure reappeared. This time Jamie was present and seated on the settee in front of the individual, unaware of its presence. However, Stan decided not to draw attention to it, as Jamie is generally unsympathetic to the subject of the paranormal – and besides, he felt the figure would not be visible to him anyway. After a few moments the figure disappeared in the same way as before and again Stan felt his neck hairs bristling.

The third appearance of the figure occurred in late May – again around 1am or possibly half past the hour. The circumstances were identical with the first sighting, with Stan, again on his own, watching television while reclining on the settee. He could feel his hair bristling, while the figure stood immobile in the same spot by the window, until after a minute or two it began gradually to fade and disappear. At no time did he actually see it appear. This is the last reported appearance of the apparition, although Stan says he is often aware of a presence.

I visited Stan on the evening of 3 June 2015 to record his account of events. In no way did I feel uneasy, with the vibe generally quite pleasant. The only time I felt nervous was while sitting on the settee by the window, half expecting Stan to interrupt the conversation with "It's behind you".



NICK MULORE

Foetal memory

I was interested to read Jenny Randles's piece about UFOs, the Oz Factor and foetal memory [FT432:31]. I've also just finished Marjorie Johnson's *Seeing Fairies*. It occurs to me sightings in that book could relate to memories in the womb, when we are flying or floating, so to speak, not grounded, and roughly fairy-sized. There are intriguing descriptions of fairies looking half-formed, tadpole-like or protoplasmic (op. cit. p.125, 128f., 213, 240).

• What a pity Antony Hippsley Coxe and Arthur Boyt [FT437:21+26] never collaborated on a book on roadkill sausages. We could have had mole merguez, badger bratwurst, and non-metaphorical toad in the hole.

Richard George

St Albans, Hertfordshire

Quartz error

Kay Allen Prout is wrong that mobile phones run on piezoelectricity derived from quartz [FT437:63], though far be it from me to second-guess the Ancients' techniques of pacifying the masses with anodyne lies about the soul communing with Akasha. Mobiles run on a mineral called Coltan, which has caused an unspeakably bloody and atrocity-ridden war in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

James Wright

Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

Cosmic duck

In FT437, Hunt Emerson proposes the existence of The Cosmic Pharaonic Duck. Like Bertrand Russell's Celestial Teapot, this cartoon poses a philosophical problem. While, in all probability, such a duck is extremely unlikely, (1) No one can presently prove its non-existence. (2) If the Universe is indeed infinite, such an unlikely object will appear somewhere.

Watch the skies. Just keep watching the skies!

Andrew Healy

Ashford, Kent

Dubious conspiracy yarns

• In 'Burning The Man' [FT435:38-43] Robin Hardy refers to the US Midwest radio stations 'pouring out stuff you wouldn't believe'. Indeed, in 1966 I was travelling late night through southern Texas in a

Greyhound bus, tuning my little radio into passing town stations. On one, an earnestly sincere gent shared his remarkable discovery.

"I have found out that Hitler was a Communist," he said. "There is a year in his life in the 1920s when no one knows where he was. I believe that he was in Moscow, being trained to use the well-known Communist techniques of [something like 'argument and disruption', I cannot recall his actual words]. He returned to Germany, used these techniques to win power, and declared war on the West. Of course he had to declare war on Russia as well to make it look good. When he was defeated he did not die but returned to the Kremlin, shaved off his moustache and is still working there to overthrow our system."

• In my letter about the Stone of Destiny [FT435:66], I forgot to say the original stone hidden from Edward I was said to be black in colour and bearing carved symbols. When the [allegedly] counterfeit stone was lifted from Westminster Abbey in 1950 and returned north, it was passed from hand to hand, and I have met someone who as a child slept with it under her bed. Others assert that it had been dropped and damaged in the heist, and was repaired by a stonemason, who made a duplicate, and inserted in between the fake pieces a written note stating that the true Westminster Stone had been retained. The fake of a fake was the stone sold for £2,000 to a Scottish newspaper so it could be recovered at Arbroath Abbey. The true counterfeit Westminster Stone was said to have been kept by the stonemason, who was possibly the person who lent it for exhibition some years ago in the Smith Museum and Art Gallery in Stirling. I dearly love doubtful conspiracy stories.

Ewan McVicar

Cromarty, Scottish Highlands

The Dore Stone

George Proctor's very interesting letter regarding the Dore Stone [FT434:64] caused me to go and pull out my copy of Michael Livingstone's recent book *Never Greater Slaughter*, which is about his continuing historical work surrounding the battle of Brunanburh. This was the final battle between the rising power of Athelstan – chief king of the expanding Anglo-Saxon empire

in the North West/West Midlands area – and a "remarkable alliance" of Rival Kings of Celtic and Viking areas of Dublin/Scotland/Strathclyde (Brythonic). His research over many years has led him, and increasing numbers of historians, to conclude that this battle was on The Wirral – modern day Bromborough! The Wirral was a long-time Viking enclave at the time, in an age where kingdoms rose and fell, and rose again – it would seem with a degree of regularity.

This battle was in AD 937, so poor old King Egbert and his brief kingdom was already long gone. Athelstan's trick was to unite Mercia and Wessex, and – ironically – employ a large band of Viking mercenaries. I believe that it was at this point, after winning this bloody battle, that Athelstan – possibly with his tongue in his cheek – proclaimed himself "Bretwalda" – with a bit more justification than some others before him. It seems that it was something of a pyrrhic victory, as fairly soon afterwards various areas came under the kingships of others not connected to his rule.

Mark J Pearson

By email

Unusual UFO

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

The northern parts of Lazio, a region in central Italy, are considered some of the most mystical and intriguing parts of the old peninsula. Steeped in millennia-long traditions and with a history that finds its roots in the old Etruscan civilization, this area is a cluster of wonderful towns, old shrines and fortean attractions.

I have spent several weeks exploring the evocative medieval hamlets of ancient Tuscany and the magnificent city of Viterbo, where the popes established their seat in the 13th century. I wandered around the fabulous Sacred Grove of Bomarzo and the stunning hilltop village Civita di Bagnoregio. In Bagnoregio I came across a hidden gem: a UFO museum like none I have ever heard of.

The museum does not focus on UFO sites, or offer explanations or questionable dioramas of alien autopsies, but rather focuses on the impact that the UFO-phenomenon has had on popular culture and society over the past few decades. The little place is a treasure trove of newspaper

clippings, illustrations, curious artefacts, magnificent toys and other everyday objects whose shape and inspiration are rooted in the ever-changing collective ideas of what aliens and their slugs look like and the purpose of their visits.

I got lost in the museum for several hours, thanks to the owner Giancarlo, who chaperoned me through the whole collection. He is a most notable person: a physician who has worked all his life in the Italian Air Force and retired several years ago with the rank of Colonel. The objects on display are from his own collection, accumulated over more than four decades. He keeps a Facebook page of his museum, <https://www.facebook.com/ufonuseum-bagnoregio/>

I strongly recommend a visit to this magical place to anyone who happens to be in the region.

Marcello C [name on file]
Stockholm, Sweden

Editor's note: Luis R González also provided an account of his visit to the museum in Fortean Traveller 102; "Tuscany's UFO Museum", FT331:74-75.

Human pigmentation

Dave Miles wrote recently about a legend relating to the origin of human pigmentation differences [FT436:59]. In the story, everyone starts out uniformly black, but a lake of white liquid is discovered, in which people are able to dye themselves white. Late arrivals, however, find the lake much depleted, and are only able to dabble the palms of their hands and the soles of their feet in the residual liquid. Mr Miles says he heard this story as a child in either Kenya or Zambia.

I can confirm the existence of this story in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) during the 1940s. My late father was stationed there during World War II, while learning to fly under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan in 1943, and he also spent some time being hosted by a local family on their farm, while convalescing from a bout of rheumatic fever. During that time he heard the story told just as Mr Miles relates it, and later relayed it to me during my childhood.

Grant Hutchison
Dundee, Scotland

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WHY FORTEAN?



FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity.

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, FT is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. FT toes no party line.

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PHENOMENOMIX

AMBULANCES

HUNT EMERSON

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, OUR LIVES WERE OVERLAID WITH A COMPLEX SET OF RITUALS, ALL VITAL TO OUR PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING!

FOR EXAMPLE, IF AN AMBULANCE PASSED, YOU HAD TO HOLD YOUR BREATH...

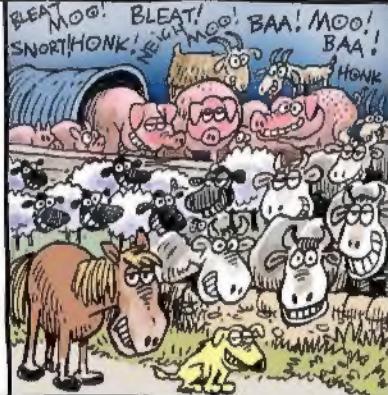
...UNTIL YOU SAW A FOUR-LEGGED ANIMAL!

THIS WAS BECAUSE THE AMBULANCE WOULD BE TRAILING A CLOUD OF DEADLY GERMS THAT WOULD INFECT YOU IF YOU BREATHED THEM IN!

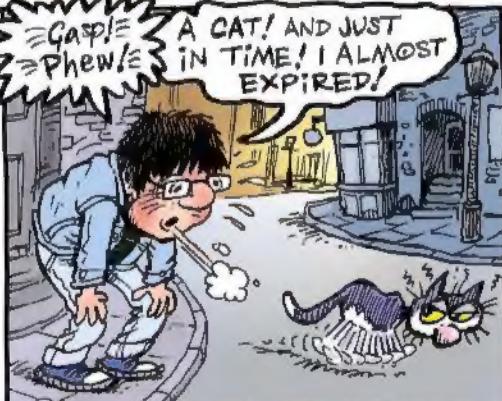
THE GERMS, ON SPOTTING THE 4-LEGGED ANIMAL, WOULD DIVERT THEIR ATTENTION TO THE EASIER PREY...

...LEAVING YOU TO BREATHE FREELY, AGAIN!

IN THE 1950s, IN THE RURAL VILLAGE WHERE I LIVED, (WALBOTT) IT WASN'T DIFFICULT TO SPOT AN ANIMAL TO TAKE YOUR PLAGUE...



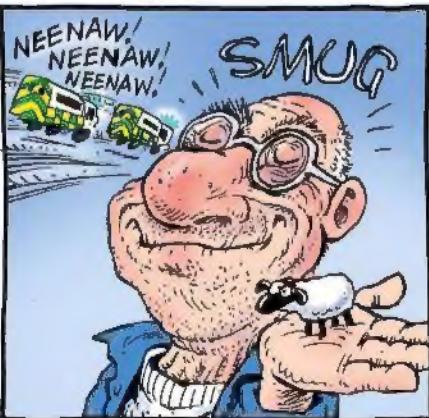
BUT AS TIME WENT ON INTO THE 1960s, AND WE MOVED TO A TOWN (BLAYDON), FARM ANIMALS WERE LESS READILY AVAILABLE!



SO I TOOK TO CARRYING A PLASTIC SHEEP IN MY POCKET!



I HAVE DONE SO TO THIS DAY, AND I HAVE NEVER CAUGHT THE PLAGUE!



BUT I DEEPLY REGRET THE NUMBER OF PLASTIC SHEEP THAT, OVER THE YEARS, I HAVE CONDEMNED TO THE PLAGUE PIT!

Bring out your dead plastic sheep!

CLANG! CLANG!



COMING NEXT MONTH



THE HAUNTED SEVENTIES

TOM PERROTT'S GHOSTLY
SCRAPBOOKS



TAKE ME TO YOUR LEADERS...

NASA'S CHANGING
RELATIONSHIP WITH UFOS

DRACULA ON TELLY,
DIANA & MORRISEY,
CRINOLINE INFERNO,
AND MUCH MORE...

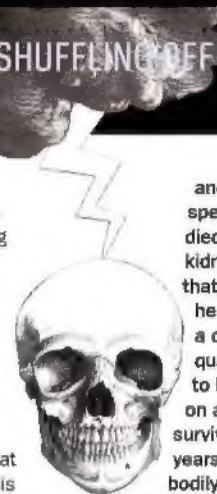
FORTEAN TIMES 440
ON SALE 4 JAN 2024

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

US Tortilla chip manufacturer Paqui have withdrawn their "One Chip Challenge" product following the death of 14-year-old Harris Wolobah. One Chip Challenge is a single tortilla chip, made with the legendarily fiery Carolina Reaper chilli. It is sold for \$10 in a sealed foil pouch enclosed in a coffin shaped box, with a warning saying the chip is for "vengeful pleasure of intense heat and pain". It has formed the basis for a viral social media stunt in which people open the package on camera, eat the chip and film their reaction, avoiding eating or drinking anything else for as long as possible afterwards. The package carries a warning saying the chip is intended for adults and should be kept out of the reach of children and that consumers should "seek medical assistance should you experience difficulty breathing, fainting or extended nausea". Although the cause has not been determined, Wolobah's family say he took the challenge hours before his sudden death and Dr Peter Chai, a medical toxicology said, "It's possible eating these chips with high concentration of capsaicin could cause death. It would really depend on the amount of capsaicin that an individual was exposed to. At high doses, it can lead to fatal dysrhythmia or irreversible injury to the heart." Before Wolobah's death, the challenge had resulted in paramedics being called to a Minnesota school when seven students fell ill after eating the chips, as well as several other hospitalisations across the country involving both teens and adults. [AP] 8 Sept 2023.

When an unnamed 32-year-old German man contacted Torben K, 48, who advertised penis enlargement services online, he was hoping to increase the girth of his member. Although the man had doubts about the procedure, he was persuaded to go ahead by Torben. The man then visited Torben's home in Solingen where he had silicone oil injected into his penis and scrotum. While the procedure did expand the girth of his penis, almost as soon as he got home the patient started to experience breathing difficulties. High State Prosecutor Wolf-Tilman Baumert said: "Unfortunately, the silicone oil ended up in the person's bloodstream. This led to severe health complications and, eventually, to his death." The man was treated in several hospitals



and spent months in agony in a specialist intensive care unit, but died of blood poisoning, liver and kidney failure. It was discovered that Torben K was not the doctor he claimed to be but was, in fact, a catering worker with no medical qualifications. He was later found to have carried out the procedure on at least one other man, who survived, and was jailed for five years for causing death by grievous bodily harm. mirror.co.uk, 29 Aug 2023.

Thirteen people aged between two and 33, all from the same family, died in Kayova in the Kavango East region of Namibia after eating "poisonous or toxic" porridge, with four others left in a critical condition. The porridge had been made with pearl millet *mahangu* flour mixed with dried and pounded fermented sediment left over from brewing homemade beer, locally known as *mundevez*. Officials said at least 20 people had eaten the meal and it is believed it had become lethal because the sediment had provided an ideal growing medium for toxic bacteria. *Sun*, 1 Jun 2023.

When the bodies of Christine Vance, 41, her sister Rebecca, 42, and Rebecca's son, 14, were found in July in and around a tent in the Gunnison National Forest near Ohio City, it was clear from the mummified state of the corpses that they had been dead for some time. The bodies showed signs of malnourishment and it is thought that they either starved or froze to death over the winter or had died from carbon monoxide poisoning after lighting a fire in their tent. The women's stepsister, Trevala Jara, said that the family had been determined to escape from civilisation and live off-grid after Rebecca became "overwhelmed by fear at the state of the world" after the Covid pandemic. "We tried to stop them," said Jara, "but they wouldn't listen, their minds were made up." She added: "They watched some YouTube videos, but doing it is totally different if you have no experience; you need years of practice to live off grid." The tent contained books on survival and foraging, although the group appeared to have been living off tinned food at the time of their deaths. Coroner Michael Barnes said: "They had a lot of literature with them about outdoor survival and stuff like that, but it looked like they supplied at the grocery store." mirror.co.uk, 29 Aug 2023.

SOMETHING FOR THE WEEKEND?

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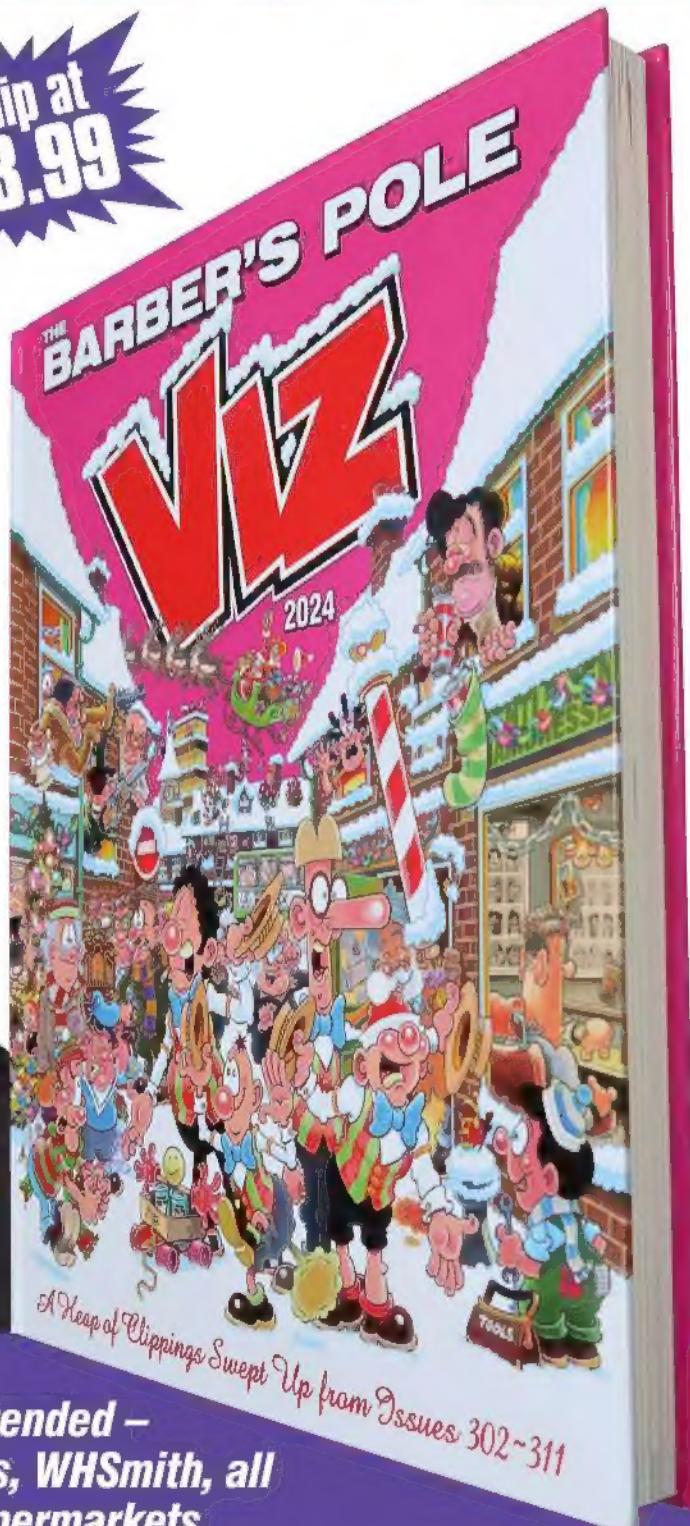
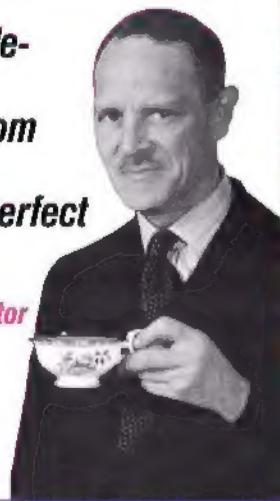
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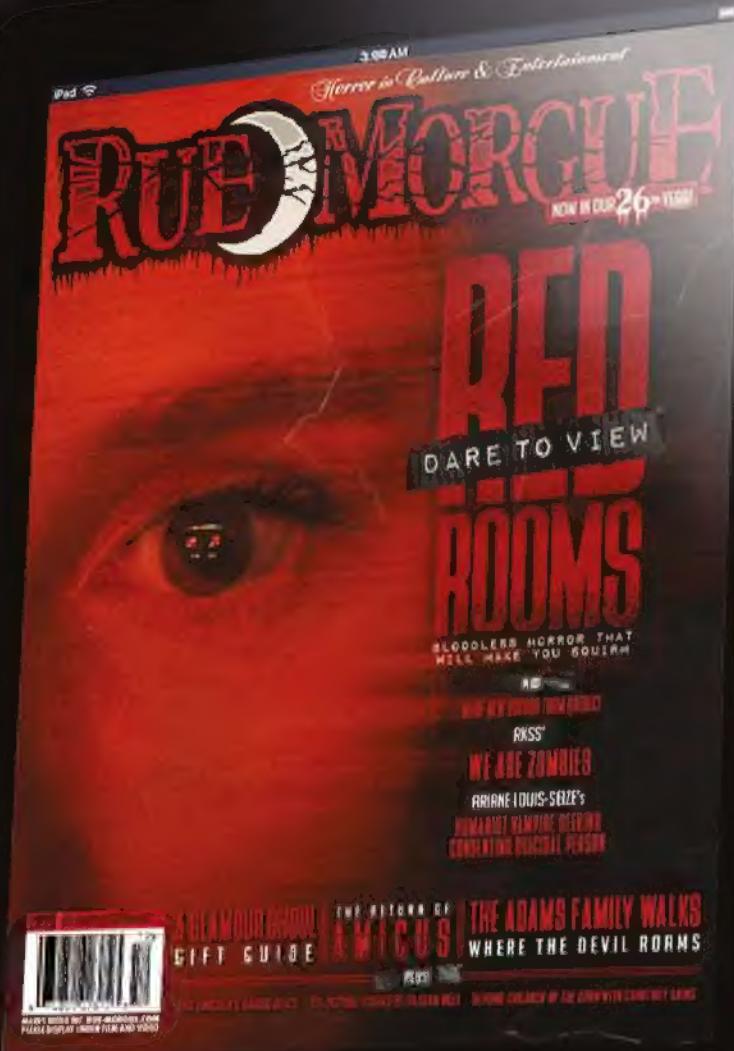
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